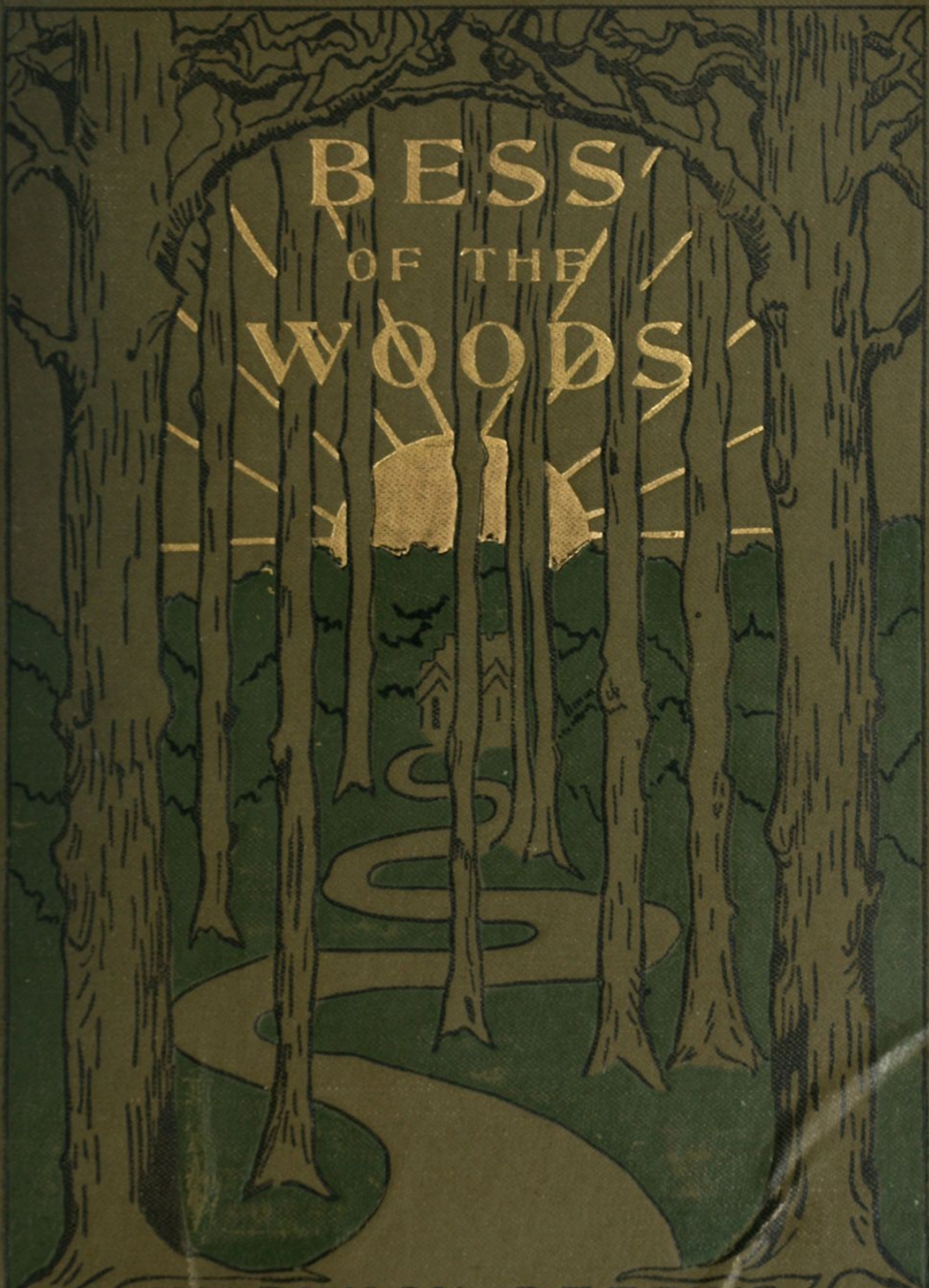
BESS OF THE WOODS



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BESS OF THE WOODS

BY

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“THE SLANDERERS” “UTHER AND IGRAINE”
ETC.

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TO
MY VERY DEAR FRIEND
JOHN CECIL RIX

BESS OF THE WOODS

I

Richard Jeffray thrust back his chair from Sir Peter Hardacre's dining-table, and stood stiff and ill at ease, like a man but half sure of his own dignity. The Dutch clock had struck three, and the winter sunlight was still flooding through the tall windows upon the polished floor. A log-fire blazed on the irons; decanters and glasses glistened on the table about a great china punch-bowl covered with green dragons and blue mandarins.

It was early in the afternoon, and yet Parson Jessel's great wig was flapping forward with an unsaintly tilt over the pastor's left eye. Sir Peter, a fat and tuberose-nosed aristocrat, in a blue coat and a brocaded waistcoat, sprawled in his arm-chair at the end of the table, his paunch abutting against the board, his full-bottomed wig flowing in slovenly profusion about his blotchy face. On the far side of the table, with his back to the fire, sat Mr. Lot Hardacre, a heavy-shouldered gentleman in a scarlet hunting-coat and buckskin breeches, whose culture was half that of a jockey, half that of a card-sharper. A long clay pipe drooped from the angle of Mr. Lot Hardacre's mouth, and his coarse, chapped hands were stuffed into the pockets of his breeches.

Richard Jeffray bowed to these three gentlemen as though he was not wholly at his ease. Sir Peter Hardacre's ungainly torpor suggested that he had fed largely and too well.

"You will pardon me, Sir Peter," he said, with a glance at Mr. Lot's sodden and impudent face, "the days are short, and I must be in the saddle. You will make excuses for me to the ladies."

The baronet puffed out his lips and elevated his eyebrows sleepily. Parson Jessel had already begun to snore. Mr. Lancelot alone appeared to retain the sparklings of intelligence in his protuberant blue eyes. He removed his pipe from his mouth, and winked at Richard Jeffray with an air of benignant patronage.

"Sister Jilian's above, cousin," he said, "strumming on the harpsichord. We're coarse devils, Dick, eh? Jil is a gentle creature, and don't swear—at least, not often."

The baronet, bulging like a Silenus, nodded his head, and fumbling for his snuff-box spilled half the contents over his waistcoat.

"Going, Dick?" he quavered. "Gad, boy, it's damned early; we shall be with the

ladies in the turn of a box. Sit down, lad. Son Lot will tell ’ee how he won fifty guineas from that card-clipping Captain Carteret last week—sapped the soldier fairly. Egad, Lot has marrow in him. Parson, pass the punch.”

A loud snore from the ecclesiastic and a thick laugh from Mr. Lancelot betrayed how fate had dealt with the fuddled shepherd of the Hardacre souls. Sir Peter thrust out his lower lip, and swore.

“Damme,” he said, “what a dull dog it is! Dick, lad, I’ll match his sermons against the heaviest brew in Sussex. Kick him, Lot; kick his shins, boy; the bowl ain’t empty yet.”

The interlude was opportune. Richard Jeffray bowed once more to the baronet, mumbled an excuse, and leaving Mr. Lot to the breaking of the cleric’s shins and slumber, stepped nimbly towards the door. Sir Peter gazed after him with an expression of fat and over-fed pity. “The lad was a nice lad, but, damn it, he couldn’t drink, and, God help him, he wouldn’t swear!” The baronet shook his wig and took snuff with some asperity. Meanwhile, Mr. Lot was amusing himself by holding the bowl of his pipe under the parson’s nose. Richard, as he closed the door, heard a mighty and portentous sneeze herald the awakening of that saintly soul.

Richard Jeffray rode out through Hardacre Park with a look of melancholy reflection on his face. He turned, when he had ridden two hundred yards or more, and gazed back at the old house, with its stately red turrets and high gables clear-cut against the thin blue of a winter sky. A great beechwood rose on the slope of the hill behind the place, while around it lay the terraced walks and trim lawns of the garden. Closely clipped hollies and yews rose above the still water of the moat. The warm, red brick, mellow in the slanting light of the sun, the ivied buttresses, the lichened stone, seemed to tone rarely with the purple gloom of the wood beyond. And this betowered, tall-chimneyed, hundred-windowed house, this rare casket memorable with all the stateliness of a stately past, held for its jewels a bevy of boozing, fox-hunting bullies whose oaths and lewd badinage seemed fit only for a tavern.

Richard Jeffray whipped his black mare out of Hardacre Chase, leaving the gaunt trees, the dew-drenched grass and rotting bracken for the muddy road that curled up towards the moors. He was a slim yet wiry youth, with a sallow face and a pair of sparkling Spanish eyes. A sensitive intelligence showed in every fibre. He wore his own black hair unpowdered, and though nature appeared to have intended him for a macaroni, he boasted more scholarly slovenliness than fashionable elegance in his clothes. Cousin Lot thought him a pretty fellow enough, but too damned womanish to be of any use in the world. The local squires respected his wealth and his breeding, did not hesitate to set their daughters at his service, and chose to despise him over their punch-bowls as a milksop and a fool.

Richard topped the heath, and reined in to scan the shadowy slopes of the wilds of Pevensel. In the far south, huge, hog-backed hills brooded over the sea, purple under a passing cloud, or glistening in the slanting sun. South, east, and west rolled

the forest land, hill on hill and valley on valley, mist-wrapped, splashed with light or smirched with shadow, a region of gloom, or of mysterious delight.

Richard Jeffray sat in the saddle and stared about him like a man refreshed. His pale face colored, his eyes brightened. This forest land, called Pevensel of old, and voted "a damned rubbish heap" by the Baronet Peter, appealed to the sentimentalist as a wild delicacy snatched from the material maw of Mammon. Here were no cropped hedges and sullen fields, no sour and unclean villages, no cabbage gardens, no frowsy and rubbish-ridden farms. Nature had her sway in Pevensel. Even the wild things were clean, sleek, and fair of limb, beautiful according to the idea upon which each had been created. The falcon glimmering under the clouds; the hare scampering amid the heather. These were preferable to clumsy, bandy-legged oafs, and to women whose tongues were as unclean as their garments.

Richard rode on again down the sandy road that ran like a gray streak through the waste of green. Had six months passed since he had posted back from Italy with the news of his father's death big in his heart? Had he not left England as a boy, and returned to it something of a man, intoxicated with many delightful superstitions, and fired with a belief in the stately grandeur of the English nation. Sir Peter and his Sussex squires had tumbled Mr. Richard's amiable theories down into their native mire. Cousin Lot had laughed and sneered at him. The Lady Letitia had assailed his soul with such worldly wisdoms as disregarded sentiment and honor. Richard had ruled his own house at Rodenham six months, built his dead father's tomb, and attempted to ingratiate himself with the boors who crowded Rodenham village. He had rattled his poetical notions against the skulls of his Sussex peers, and half-fooled himself into imagining that he was in love with gray-eyed Mistress Jilian, his cousin, who wore flaming petticoats and preposterous hoops, and rouged and ogled like the veteran of thirty that she was. Richard Jeffray confessed himself a fool as he rode down that day through the wilds of Pevensel and cogitated upon the beauties of a rustic life. The landscape was certainly not at fault, and the man of sentiment believed himself in sympathy with nature. The human element was the poison in the pot. He supposed that these Wealden folk became, like the clay they lived upon, heavy and sodden, dedicated to the producing of wheat at sixty shillings a quarter.

The sky seemed prophetic of snow, a canopy of purple clouds pressing from the north like some fate-bearing vapor of the Norse legends. The west was a great cavern of fire, with ruddy veins of glowing ore tonguing scarlet and gold across the sky. The wild, fir-spired wastes of Pevensel loomed strange and mysterious under the slanting light. There were tall thickets bannered with crimson on the hills, stretches of rusty heather and dark-green gorse, covered as with a web of gold. Now and again a vague wind would start up out of the silence, and come roaring and moaning amid the swaying trees.

From Beacon Rock the road plunged suddenly into a broad valley. A tawny, iron-stained stream trickled on one side of the highway; on the other a beechwood rose towards the west, its round pillars and bronze carpeting of leaves streaked and

splashed by the setting sun. A thousand intertwining branches netted the red and angry splendor of the sky.

There was a sudden scuffling in the wood as Jeffray rode by, a score of black pigs running squeaking and grunting amid the dead leaves and bracken. Close to the road, under the shadow of a great beech, sat an old woman with her chin near her knees, her nose a red hook above her lipless mouth. Behind the crone, and leaning against the trunk of the tree, stood a girl in a green gown and scarlet stays laced up over her full yet girlish bust, her short gown displaying a pair of buckled shoes and neat, gray-stockinged ankles. She wore also a red cloak, the hood, lined with rabbit-skin, turned back upon her shoulders.

Jeffray glanced at the pair as he reined in to avoid riding down a couple of pigs that were grunting and scurrying about the road. The girl in the red cloak was a tall wench with coal-black hair, petulant, full lips, cheeks tanned a rich red, a color that would have made the ladies of St. James's appear pale and dim. Her eyes were of a hard and crude blue, looking almost fierce under their straight black brows. There was a haughty and intractable air about her. The sensuous curve of her strong figure seemed to suggest the agility and strength of a beautiful savage.

The old woman had clambered up and was laying her stick across the backs of the pigs with a verve that did her hardihood credit. The girl by the tree stood motionless, as though in no mood for playing under-swine-herd to the old lady. She was staring boldly at Jeffray, with no play of emotion upon her face, no softening of her large and petulant mouth. She looked, indeed, like a child of the wild woods, taught to rely solely upon her senses, and those primitive instincts that the forest life had developed.

The old woman dropped a courtesy to Jeffray as he rode on, but the girl by the tree favored him only with her barbaric stare. The storm wind was rising. It came crying through the wood like the massed trumpet-blasts of some black-bannered host. Jeffray drew his cloak about him, whipped up his horse, and held on for Rodenham. He still saw the hard blue eyes, the full, petulant lips, the black hair falling desirously about the ill-tempered and glowing face. He thought of Miss Jilian Hardacre's rouged cheeks and simpering gray eyes. Surely the baronet's daughter needed more blood under her delicate skin when even this forest wench made her seem thin and old.

II

It had begun to snow by the time Jeffray had left Pevensel Forest for the meadow-lands and brown fallows that spoke of civilization. Dusk had fallen, the whirling snow-flakes dimming the red glow in the west, yet filling the twilight with a gray radiance. Richard saw the lights of Rodenham village glimmering faintly in the valley below him. Soon he was riding through his own park with the thickening snow driving like mist amid the trees.

Jeffray left his mare at the stables and entered the house by the side door from the garden. The old priory of Rodenham was one of those dream-houses that seem built up out of the idyls of the past. It was full of long galleries, dark entries, beams, recessed windows, huge cupboards, and winding stairs. Casements glimmered in unexpected places. The rooms led one into the other at all angles, and were rarely on a level. Here were panels black with age, phantasmal beds, carved chests that might have tombed mysteries for centuries, faded tapestries that breathed forth tragedy as they waved upon the walls. All was dark, mellow, stately, silent. The very essences of life seemed to have melted into the stones; the deep throes of the human heart had become as echoes in each solemn room.

Jeffray found the Lady Letitia, his aunt, playing piquet in the damask drawing-room with Dr. Sugg, the rector of Rodenham. The Lady Letitia was a red-beaked and bushy browed old vulture, with wicked eyes and a budding beard. Her towering "head" was stuffed full of ribbons and feathers, her stupendous hoop of red damask, her gown flowered red and blue. The Lady Letitia was one of those preposterous old ladies who labor under the delusion that a woman of sixty may still presume to trade upon the reputation of impudent loveliness she had created some thirty years ago. Everything about the Lady Letitia was false and artificial. Her teeth and eyebrows were emblems of what her virtues were, manufactured articles to make the wearer passable in society. The old lady had deigned to drive down from London in her coach-and-four to spend Christmas with her nephew, a piece of affectionate economy necessitated by heavy losses at cards. She had deigned also to take Richard's education in hand. The lad was deplorably quiet, gauche, and sensitive.

"So you are back at last, Richard," she said, looking like a pompous old parrot, with one eye on her cards and one on her nephew. "Seat yourself, Dr. Sugg; Richard does not want you to stand on ceremony. Snowing, eh? Detestable weather; the country is like a quagmire already, as I may see by your coat and breeches, nephew. It is usual for a gentleman to dress before presenting himself to a lady. You look surprised, Richard. 'Is it not my own house?' you say. Certainly, mon cher, so it is, but I am a lady of birth, sir, and I like to be treated as such. How is Mistress Jilian? Deft at the harpsichord as ever?"

Richard, whose face had flushed towards the end of this oration, drew a chair beside the card-table, and seated himself before the fire. It was characteristic of the Lady Letitia that she had a habit of ruling and correcting every one. She would tilt her beak of a nose, fix her wicked little eyes on the victim, and drop gall and bitterness from her shrivelled old mouth with a condescension that made her detestable. There was an avaricious glint in the old lady's eyes for the moment. Poor Dr. Sugg, purple-faced and stertorous, came nightly to the priory in clean ruffles and a well-powdered wig to permit the Lady Letitia to possess herself of his small cash in the hope that the worthy dowager might use her influence on his behalf with my lord the bishop.

Aunt Letitia turned suddenly and rapped her nephew's shoulder with her fan.

"Richard," she said, with some asperity, "is it customary to sit between a lady and the fire?"

Jeffray apologized and shifted his chair. Dr. Sugg was engaged in shuffling the cards; the dowager's black eyes were busy scanning her nephew's person with the critical keenness of a woman of the world.

"Richard, where did you get that coat?" she asked.

"At Lewes, aunt."

"Pooh! the rascal has made it like a sack. You must have a smart tailor, boy. I cannot allow you to be disgraced by your clothes."

Dr. Sugg, who was glancing over his cards, cast a pathetic look at Richard, and groaned over his inveterate bad luck. Aunt Letitia's eyes glistened; her rouged and scraggy face was radiant with miserly good humor.

"My dear Richard," she said, benignantly, "I must really take you to The Wells with me, and introduce you into respectable society. You must learn elegance, dignity, address. These virtues are as necessary to a young man of good family as a good tailor or a smart hatter. You must have your hair dressed properly; I will instruct Gladden myself in the latest fashion. Bucolic melancholy does not pass for fine breeding in elegant circles."

Jeffray smiled somewhat cynically at his aunt as he watched her clutching at poor Sugg's shillings. He was heartily tired of his elderly relative's imperial patronage. She condescended to accept his hospitality, and improved the occasion by pestering him with her worldly superficialities, abusing his "bookishness" and amending his manners. The nephew looked forward to his aunt's departure with a sincerity that was ingenuous and enthusiastic. The Lady Letitia was still, however, bent upon economy. Though the country bored her excessively, she was saving money at her nephew's expense, and his hospitality would enable her to go to Tunbridge Wells in the spring unencumbered by debt.

Dr. Suggs departed with an empty purse after supper, to trudge home to the parsonage through the drifting snow. The Lady Letitia established herself in a fauteuil beside the fire in the damask drawing-room, with *Tom Jones* on her knee

and a glass of steaming rum at her elbow. Jeffray had taken refuge in the library, the only room in the house that Aunt Letitia suffered him to possess in peace. The dowager bore herself as though she were the mistress of Rodenham Priory, walked the linen-room and kitchen, rated the servants, and even bearded old Peter Gladden, the butler, in his den.

Richard Jeffray had brought many books, pictures, and curios from abroad, having been plentifully supplied with money by his father, who had been something of an antiquary and a man of taste. The old library, with its towering shelves and wainscoted walls, held the treasures that Richard had transmitted from time to time from Italy. Here were Etruscan and Greek vases; boxes of coins, rings, and charms; fragments of statuary and of mosaic. The gathering of engraved stones had formed Jeffray's most extravagant hobby. Egyptian scarabæi, gnostic charms, classical cameos and intaglios, mostly forged, were packed away in a satinwood bureau. Jeffray boasted a strong-box full of sapphires, emeralds, garnets, opals, chalcedonies, sards, jaspers and other stones. Old Peter Gladden had set two lighted candles on the escritoire near the window. A manuscript lay open on the writing flap, the manuscript of an epic that Richard had been laboring at for months. It was conceived in the Miltonic style, and dealt with the descent of Christ into Hades.

The Lady Letitia was yawning over the love affairs of Sophia Weston when her nephew joined her in the drawing-room. She roused herself, sat up stiffly in her chair, and held up her fan to keep the heat of the fire from her painted face. The dowager regarded Richard with the solemnity of a witch of Endor. Jeffray had learned to dread these nightly interviews. Aunt Letitia was forever flinging her sarcasms at his head, and being a sensitive and easy-tempered youth he had never presumed to flout her in her pedagogic utterances.

It was evident to Richard that the dowager had been meditating as usual over his youthful eccentricities. She looked more pompous and austere than usual, like some hoary catechist ready to hear the callow creed of youth. The wind was moaning over the great house, tossing the sombre boughs of the cedars that towered above the lawns. The windows rattled; every chimney was full of sound. Jeffray flung more wood upon the fire, and sat down opposite his aunt with a look of melancholy resignation on his face.

"Richard," said the old lady, suddenly, tilting her red beak and fixing her eyes upon her nephew.

Jeffray roused himself as from a reverie.

"You are often at Hardacre House."

"Am I, Aunt Letitia?"

"Often enough, Richard, to suggest the attraction to me."

Jeffray turned and watched the fire. The light played upon his sallow face and melancholy eyes, his plain black coat, the white ruffles falling down upon the small and refined hands. There was an air of picturesqueness about him that even Aunt

Letitia recognized, despite the fact that she preferred a mischievous dandy to a book-befogged scholar.

"Richard."

The young man glanced at her inquiringly.

"Jilian is thirty-five if she is a day. She pads her figure and dyes her hair. You must be careful, lad. The wench has angled these twenty years. I can make a better match for you than that."

Richard had grown accustomed to the Lady Letitia's blunt methods of attack. He crossed one leg over the other, and strove to appear at his ease under the old lady's critical gaze. The dowager was forever hinting at the undesirable nature of an alliance with the Hardacre family. They had birth, certainly, but what were a baronet's blazonings in aristocratic England? Sir Peter was as poor as a parson; his estates were mortgaged to the last tree. Miss Jilian had been in the market for years, and would bring nothing in the shape of a dowry. The Lady Letitia dilated materially on all these points, as though she were advising her nephew on the purchase of a mansion.

"You are very kind, Aunt Letitia," said the young man, somewhat sullenly, at the end thereof, "but I believe I am capable of choosing myself a wife."

The old lady's eyes glittered.

"So you are going to marry Jilian Hardacre, eh?"

"I did not say so."

"Pooh, boy! haven't I eyes in my head? So she has caught you, has she, the minx? Yet I must confess, nephew, that you do not seem ravished at the thought of embracing such a bride."

Richard drew his knees up and fidgeted in his chair.

"Nothing of a serious nature has passed between us," he said, awkwardly.

"Nothing serious, eh? And what do you call 'serious,' mon cher? Oglings and letters, gloves, flowers, whisperings in window-seats! Egad, nephew, you will have that gambling oaf of a Lot to deal with. They are mad to marry Jilian, and they want money."

The old lady was quite flushed and eloquent, while Richard's brown face expressed surprise. He was innocent of worldly guile, nor had he scented such matrimonial subtleties in the Hardacre mansion.

"Sir Peter has been very kind to me," he said.

"Noble old gentleman! And he has never been for pushing Miss Jilian into your arms, eh? No, I warrant you, the wench is spry and buxom enough herself. You are not a bad-looking lad, Richard, and you have money."

Jeffray still appeared in a fog.

"I do not understand you, aunt," he said.

“Not understand me!”

“No.”

“Nephew Dick, you are a bigger fool than I thought you were. Come, lad, blab to me; have you offered yourself to the fair Jilian?”

Richard blushed, rather prettily for a man, and shook his head.

“It has not gone as far as that,” he confessed.

“Well, nephew,” she said, brusquely, “are you in love with the lady?”

“I thought I was—”

Aunt Letitia sniffed, and flicked her fan.

“Dear little love-bird,” she rasped, ironically; “let me warn you, Richard, before it is too late, that unless this pretty romance is locked in the lumber-room you will have that bully of a Lot raging round here about his sister’s honor.”

Richard straightened up stiffly in his chair and stared at his aunt in melancholy astonishment.

“I have done nothing to compromise Miss Jilian,” he said.

“Nothing!” and the old lady cackled.

“On my honor, Aunt Letitia.”

“Dear lad, how innocent you are! Your virginity is better than a sermon. A pity Miss Jilian Hardacre cannot say the same about her sweet person. Well, Richard, if you take an old woman’s advice, you will break with the lady, delicately, gently, mind you. Miss Jilian is a tender young thing, and must be handled with discretion.”

“And Cousin Lot—?”

“Can you fight, Richard?”

“Well, I am not much of a swordsman. But if Sir Peter thinks—”

“That you have paid undue attention to his dear daughter—”

“Yes—”

“You will sacrifice your virgin honor, eh?”

“Aunt Letitia, I trust I shall never act dishonorably by any woman.”

The dowager shut up her fan suddenly with a snap, yawned, and announced that she was going to her chamber.

“You are an incorrigible fool, Richard,” she said, contemptuously; “please ring for my maid. I see that it is quite useless to reason with such a saint.”

III

In one of the valleys of the forest of Pevensel lay the hamlet of the forest-folk, some half-dozen cottages of unhewn stone, their flagged roofs covered with moss and lichen. There were gardens about the scattered cottages, an orchard or two, and a few strips of cultivated land where trees had been grubbed up, and whin and heather routed. On the west the ground fell abruptly to the banks of a stream that flashed and glittered under the pine-boughs.

These forest-folk mingled but little with the hinds of the neighboring villages. They were all of Grimshaw stock, sprung from the loins of Isaac Grimshaw and his brother. There were Dan and David, sons to Isaac; old Ursula their aunt, and Bess, her foster-child; also Solomon, Isaac's brother, who had caused ten youngsters to be brought into the world. Isaac, a white-haired septuagenarian with a lame leg and a pair of unfathomable gray eyes, gave law and order to the clan like a patriarch of old. Dan, Black Dan, as the others called him, upheld his father's word with the brute strength of his untamed body.

Rude and unlettered as were these woodlanders, they came of finer stock than the oafs who toiled on the Sussex farms. The Grimshaws never seemed to lack for money, for Dan would drive his wagon into Rookhurst or Lewes thrice a year, and spend sums that a squire might have disbursed with pride. They were considered notorious smugglers, these men of Pevensel, though the burning of charcoal and the smelting of iron were the crafts they practised in pretence of an honest living. They had good stuff, solid furniture, broad beds, pewter, and fine crockery in their cottages. The men wore the best cloth, were well-armed, and never lacked for spirits and tobacco. The squalor and poverty of an average village contrasted with the clean comfort of the hamlet of Pevensel.

How did the Grimshaws come by their money? That was the question the country-folk asked of one another over their pipes and ale, a question also that the revenue gentlemen had attempted to solve in vain. No one knew save Isaac, old Ursula, and Dan, of the chest buried in the deeps of the forest, stuffed with guineas, jewels, and ingots of gold. No one knew that Bess, old Ursula's foster-child, was a strangeling in Pevensel from over the sea. Twenty years had passed since the *Richmond Lass* had been scuttled in a fog off Beachy Head, after her captain had been murdered and certain of the crew. An English officer and his wife had shared the same fate, paying with their lives for the treasure they carried with them. Four sailors—two Irishmen, a Hollander, and a Portuguese—had come ashore by night in the jolly-boat with a heavy chest and the dead officer's daughter, a child of three. They had scuttled the jolly-boat, after filling her with stones, and, striking cross-country, had disappeared with the child into the forest of Pevensel. Only Isaac and

Ursula knew the end of the tale, and John, Isaac's eldest son, who had died five years later. The four sailors had lodged at the Grimshaws, bargained with Isaac, and, after drinking heavily, had been murdered in their sleep. The treasure-chest hidden in the forest, four skeletons buried under an old oak, the girl Bess, were all that recalled that tragedy of the sea.

It was St. Agnes's Eve, and snow had fallen heavily for a night and a day. The sky had cleared towards sunset, showing the west red above the white hills and the snow-capped trees. The moon was full that night, and her splendor turned Pevensel into a wilderness of witchcraft and white magic, an endless maze of tall, silent trees struck mute betwixt the moonlight and the snow.

Old Ursula Grimshaw, Isaac's sister, lived alone with Bess in the cottage nearest to the woods. Pine-boughs overhung the roof, and the allies of the forest ran black and solemn from the very walls. Whin, whortleberry, heather, and the blown wind-rack of the trees had conquered one-half of the little garden. Bess and old Ursula were the pair whom Richard Jeffray had passed the day before, tending hogs in the beechwood by the road.

It was St. Agnes's Eve, and Bess sat before the wood-fire in the kitchen, her chin in her palms, her elbows on her knees. Old Ursula had gone to bed, leaving Bess to watch the flickering embers. The room was paved with stone, a warm, snug chamber despite the deep snow gleaming under the moon without. Herbs, bundles of onions, flitches of bacon, a gun, sheaves of feathers, hung from the great beams. There was much polished pewter on the shelves; a great linen-press behind the door; several oak chairs ranged about the walls; brass candlesticks, an hour-glass and a Dutch clock stood on the mantle-shelf, and on an iron hook above the fire a kettle still hissed peacefully.

Bess had loosed her black hair about her shoulders so that it rippled and shone about her face. Her bare feet were on the hearth-stone, her gray stockings and buckled shoes lying near to dry before the fire. Bess's eyes were building pictures amid the embers stacked behind the iron bars. It was St. Agnes's Eve, and the girl's head was packed full of old Ursula's superstitious lore. She was bent on trying a dream that night. She had kissed neither man, woman, nor child all day, had fasted since noon, and whispered a charm up the great chimney. Now that old Ursula's black cat had lapped up some milk, and was dozing before the fire, Bess rose up to put herself to bed.

The girl's room lay on the upper floor at the back of the cottage, its single window looking out over the valley. Bess, after raking out the fire and seeing that the door was fast, lighted her candle, and climbed the wooden stairs to her room under the roof. A clean shift was laid out on the bed, and the sheets had been put on fresh that morning, for St. Agnes, it was said, loved to find a wench in spotless gear. There were fresh pulled bays strewn upon the pillow, a couple of red apples, and a new shoe.

The room being cold, and Bess propitiously sleepy, she disrobed briskly, drew

on the clean shift, laid the bay sprigs, apples, and shoe on the chair by the bed, and slipped in between the sheets. Lying straight and on her back, after old Ursula's orders, she put her right hand beneath her head, saying:

"Now the God of Love send me my desire." Then, since it was deemed discreet to make sure of sleep with all speed, Bess rolled the clothes about her, blew out the candle, and flung her black hair away from her over the pillow.

Whether it was a mere trick of the brain or no, or whether the good saint tripped down from heaven on the girl's behalf, Bess dreamed a dream that night as she lay in her attic with the pine-boughs swaying snow-ladened without her window. It seemed to her that she was gathering herbs for old Ursula amid the ruins of the Abbey of Holy Cross in the woods beside the river. The sun was at full noon, since the roofless refectory was ablaze with light. By the doorway Bess dreamed that she came upon a plant with green and lustrous leaves and a great red bloom shooting up upon a tall, straight stalk. The flower was so fair and strange that she stooped to pluck it, and in the plucking found the petals change to blood. Drawing back in fear, and looking at her red hand, she saw the figure of a man darken the arched doorway. He stood there looking at Bess in silence, with a peculiar expression of pain upon his brown and boyish face. Bess took notice even in her dream that he was dressed in black and had white ruffles at his wrists. As she wondered where she had seen the face before, the man vanished away from her without a word, and St. Agnes's dreamer awoke in her bed.

She lay still, yet shivering a little, the vision still playing before her eyes. A low wind had risen, and she could hear it moving in the boughs of the trees without. Beams of moonlight came slanting through the casement to shine upon the polished panelling of an old cupboard that stood against the wall. The cottage seemed utterly still and dark. Bess started up in bed on her elbow of a sudden, her hair falling down upon the pillow, her eyes shining even in the dusk of the room.

Surely she had heard a shower of pebbles rattling against her window. The pine-boughs had been lopped but a week ago by Dan because they smote the glass when the wind blew. She sat up with the bedclothes looped about her waist, and her shift showing her big white arms and full round throat. As she listened there came a second pattering of stones against the casement. Bess, slipping out of bed and pulling on her stockings, threw her red cloak over her shoulders and crept across the room to the window.

Slipping the catch, she thrust open the frame and peered out, with her head on a level with the swaying boughs. The carpeting of snow stretched clear and brilliant under the moon to end in the murk where the woods thickened, and there was no sound save the soughing of the wind in the trees. Bess's eyes hardened as she leaned over the sill. She gave a short, sharp cry, and drew back as though to close the casement.

"Bess," came a gruff whisper up the wall.

There was trampled snow under the window. A man was standing there in the

moonlight, the upper part of his face shadowed by the brim of his hat. A dwarfed and exaggerated silhouette of his broad and burly figure was thrown by the moon's light upon the snow. He was standing with one arm against the wall, while his head was but six feet or less below the ledge of the low window.

"Bess."

The girl leaned out again, and looked down into the man's face.

"Is that you, Dan?"

"Yes. Old Ursula's snoring, eh?"

"What are you meddling here at midnight for?"

She could see the man's hairy face straining up towards her, the lips parted in an insinuating grin, the moonlight shining in his eyes.

"I've had a dream of you, Bess," he said.

She frowned, and stared down at him almost fiercely from her vantage-point.

"Well, what of that?"

"It's the saint's night, lass. I reckon you'd rather see a man of blood and muscle under your window than lie dreaming of that sheep-faced fool of a David."

Bess's mouth curled in the moonlight. She drew her red cloak about her throat, and laughed at the man beneath her on the snow.

"Go home to bed, you great fool," she said. "Do you think I shall thank you for being dragged up in the cold to see your ugly face?"

Dan Grimshaw stood back from the window and looked up at her with his teeth showing above his beard.

"Steady, Bess!" he growled—"steady!"

She made as though to close the window, her bare arm gleaming in the moonlight as she reached for the catch.

"You are not my man, Dan Grimshaw," she said, curling her lips over the words.

"Maybe young David would have had a kiss thrown him," he retorted, hotly.

"Maybe—he would."

"I'll break the young fool's back if I catch him dangling at your heels."

"Take care of your own business, Dan," she said, clapping to the casement and creeping back to bed.

IV

Bess was coming over the snow next morning from the thatched shed where she had been milking Dame Ursula's cows, when Dan Grimshaw slouched round the corner of the cottage with his gun over his shoulder. He had been away in the woods early and had brought back a hare, a brace of woodcock, and a widgeon that he had knocked over in the old fish-ponds of the Abbey of Holy Cross. A black spaniel followed at his heels. Bess, in her red petticoat, her cheeks aglow under her coal-black hair, came over the snow towards him with the fresh milk frothing in the pail.

"Morning to ye, Bess," quoth the great, hairy-faced animal whose huge calves and bulging shoulders were those of a stunted giant. "I've brought ye back some game, lass, in return for breaking your sleep last night. I'm sorry if I angered ye."

He held out the hare and the three birds in one great red paw, grinning amiably, yet with a glint in his red-brown eyes. Bess smiled at Dan under her scarlet hood. A lass needed wit in such a woodland haunt as this, where the strongest arm ruled, and men fought like quick, subtle, and resourceful, glib with her tongue and clever with her eyes. The felinity of her nature was developed when she must purr and fawn, or spit and extend her claws as necessity commanded. Bess did not love Black Dan, but Isaac Grimshaw's son was a man to be humored rather than rebuffed.

"You have a good heart, Dan," she said, kindly enough. "I was oversharp with ye last night. I jumped out of bed on the left side, and was as cross in the cold as might be. Won't you come in and take breakfast with us?"

The man turned and walked with her towards the cottage, carrying the game in one hand, the gun in the other. His eyes watched Bess as she walked, tall and straight as a cypress, her stride almost that of a man, her head poised finely on her slightly arched neck. He noticed the muscles and sinews standing out in the strong brown forearm that carried the pail, the trim, gray-stockinged ankles under the short red petticoat.

"Did ye dream of me, Bess?" he asked, with a grin.

"Not I," she laughed, good-humoredly.

"Or of young David?"

"No, nor of David."

"Then ye did not dream at all, lass," he said, with his brown eyes burning.

"No, Dan, I have not seen my man as yet."

Old Ursula came to the door of the cottage at the moment with a broom in her brown fists, looking for all the world like an old witch. She gave Dan a glare from her bright eyes, and scolded Bess for going out into the snow in her best shoes.

“I have asked Dan to breakfast, mother,” said the girl, with a laugh; “see the game he has brought us home.”

“Dan to breakfast, indeed! There be but two rashers in the pan and two eggs in the pot. We can’t feed Dan at such short notice.”

The man frowned at her, kicked his dog that was for sparring with old Ursula’s cat, tossed the hare and birds onto a settle by the door, and jerked his gun up over his shoulder. He and Dame Ursula were not the best of friends, and Black Dan, who feared no mortal thing in breeches, stood half in awe of the old beldam. He clawed his fur cap from off his head, stared hard at Bess, and stood fidgeting on the step.

“I reckon I’d better go home, lass,” he said, sulkily.

Bess set her milk-pail down on the stone floor and untied her hood.

“You take some cooking for, Dan,” she said, mischievously.

“I don’t want to lick shoe-leather for a welcome.”

“Never worry. We will be ready for you another day.”

Bess, having caught a significant twinkle in Dame Ursula’s eyes, gave Dan Grimshaw a courtesy, and picked up her pail. The man pulled his fur cap down over his eyes, and, with a last glance at the girl, plodded away over the snow, whistling, his breath steaming on the frosty air. Bess watched him go, and then closed and locked the door. Old Ursula was bending over the fire, turning the bacon in the pan.

She looked at Bess curiously, and scolded the black cat that had put its fore-paws on the milk-pail and was trying to lap the milk.

“Did you dream, lass?” she asked, inquisitively.

Bess looked serious of a sudden and colored, though her face hardly betrayed any deepening flush. She was still puzzling over the face of the man she had seen in her dream, and yet the girl was not in a mood to confess to Mother Ursula in the matter.

“Not I,” she said, laughing, and taking a rough cloth from a drawer and spreading it on the oak table.

“Not of David?”

“Why should I dream of David, mother?”

Ursula frowned, and mumbled over the pan. Isaac’s youngest son was her favorite, a tall, flaxen-polled stripling, with a merry face and good-humored blue eyes. Ursula did not love Black Dan. He was too big and masterful, too surly, too much of a great bully.

Bess had spread the cloth.

“Dan came and threw stones at my window,” she said, suddenly.

“Hey!”

“I told him I wouldn’t have climbed out of bed to see his ugly face.”

Old Ursula forked the rashers onto a hot plate and looked at Bess meaningly,

wagging a lean forefinger to give emphasis to her words.

"You must be shy of Dan," she said, shrewdly.

"Shy, mother?"

"The great fool is a rough, masterful dog. Throw him a bone now and then, lass, to keep him from growing surly. He's no mate for you, girl, the great, black-faced oaf. David's the lad to make a good husband. You must be shy of Dan, Bess."

The girl swept her black hair over her ears, laughed, and began to bustle about the kitchen.

"I can take care of myself, mother," she said.

"Better be your own mistress, lass, than let Black Dan have the handling of your love."

Thus a certain superficial similarity may be traced between the lots of Richard Jeffray and Bess of the Woods. Both had a garrulous and world-wise relative to stem with the calthrops of caution the careless confidence of youth. While old Ursula pattered in the inglenook of Black Dan's ugliness of face and temper, and extolled the blond David for his red cheeks and good-humored eyes, the Lady Letitia would ask her nephew with the greatest gravity, "What color Miss Jilian fancied for her hair this season? Had Miss Hardacre had that front tooth replaced? Had Richard ever heard of the Soakington affair, when Miss Jilian had eloped with Ensign Soakington of a marching regiment, and had been overtaken and brought back unmarried by Sir Peter? Yes, it was quite true that Miss Hardacre had spent the night with the ensign at an inn at Reigate before Sir Peter and Brother Lot had ended the romance with their whips. What! Richard had not heard the tale! Well, it was an old scandal, and had happened ten years ago. Yes, there had been other affairs. Sir Peter was wise in desiring to get his daughter married."

Now Richard Jeffray was a sensitive youth, and though the Lady Letitia's sarcasms gored him beneath his air of amiable patience, he was not a little disturbed by her gibes and her innuendoes. Richard had inherited a chivalrous temper from his father, and he was something of a young Quixote in his notions of honor. Certainly he had often idled beside Miss Jilian's tambour-frame, attended her as she warbled at the harpsichord, danced and ridden with her, gazed into her gray eyes with a fervor that was not platonic. Miss Hardacre had been very kind to him, so had Sir Peter, and even Cousin Lot, in his insolent and patronizing way. Moreover, the Lady Letitia herself was not a white statue of truth and candor. Richard knew that she cheated poor Sugg at cards, rouged and powdered, and wore false eyebrows. And surely Miss Jilian was a very handsome young lady, and if she dressed somewhat gaudily, it was fashion's fault and not her own. Richard supposed that most young ladies had indulged in love affairs in their teens. Had not he himself when a boy ogled Dr. Sugg's daughter Mary for weeks together? And in Italy he had even imagined a little opera singer to be the finest feminine creation the world had ever doted upon.

Thus the amiable and generous assling conceived that it would be a gross piece of dishonor on his part were he to treat Miss Jilian Hardacre after the fashion that the Lady Letitia advised. By reason of the extreme delicacy of his sentiment he felt himself impelled rather to exaggerate his courtesies to that young lady, lest he should be charged with trifling with the pure peace of a spinster's heart. It was not that Richard stood altogether in awe of Cousin Lancelot's hectoring courage. Jeffray was no coward, though a dreamer. Very possibly his aunt's cynicisms had operated in a contrary direction to that which the old pharmaceutist had intended. Contradiction begets contrariness; pessimism preens the wings of ardor. It may have been that the lad's innate sense of chivalry was stirred, and that the lamps in that gorgeous Temple of Beauty flashed a bewitching glamour into Richard's soul. At all events, he did not slink like a dishonest cur from the maligned maiden's side. He still continued to kiss her hand, and to admire her profile, a little forcefully perhaps, as she sat and played to him on the harpsichord.

One morning, a week or more after his debate with Aunt Letitia, Richard rode over to Hardacre House and dined with Sir Peter, Mr. Lot, and certain of the latter gentleman's sporting friends. These bluff Sussex boobies could by no means fathom young Jeffray's character. They took his sensitive reserve for pride, his occasional outbursts of enthusiasm for sentimentality. Among these gentlemen the manly virtues were of the florid order. He who swore most, drank most, debauched most, was voted a fine fellow, a man of blood and bottom. Richard Jeffray, refined, sensitive, and a scholar, shrivelled and shrank before these noisy boors. They did not love him for his melancholy and his silence. "The young fool wanted pap and a flannel binder." One rosy-gilled quipster made it his especial business that day to point his jokes at Richard's expense, till he was called to order by Cousin Lot across the table.

"Tie up your funny nag, Tom," quoth Mr. Lancelot, with a glint of the eye, "he's a stale and dull beast. Dick Jeffray's too much of a gentleman to straddle your spavined jokes."

Mr. Piggott blinked and guffawed. Next moment he spilled his wine, and squealed as the heel of Mr. Lot's boot came crunching upon his toe under the table.

"Damn it, sir—"

"Hallo, was that your foot, Tom? Beg pardon; I've got such infernal long legs."

Mr. Piggott took the hint, mopped up the wine with a napkin, and relapsed into silence. He was one of the Hardacre toadies who swilled Sir Peter's punch, swore in voluble admiration over Mr. Lot's escapades, and always expressed himself ravished by Miss Jilian's charms. Sir Peter had instructed his son as to the necessity for blanketing Richard's sensitive soul. Hence, Mr. Lot, wise in his generation, had come to regard Jeffray as a prospective brother-in-law, a pretty bridegroom to be cherished for Miss Jilian's sake. He might despise the youth himself, but it was not Sir Peter's policy to suffer Richard to be frightened from Hardacre by his raw-boned and boisterous guests.

Richard did not see the fair Mistress Jilian that day. Cousin Lot announced to him, with a leer, that his sister was abed with a sick headache. Should he deliver a note to her from her dear cousin? It would do Jilian a world of good no doubt to get a glimpse of her cousin's pretty sentences. Richard blushed, smiled, contented himself with sending his "sympathetic and cousinly respect" to the suffering angel. The truth was this, though Richard did not know it, Miss Hardacre had been trying some new cosmetic from town, and the treacherous stuff had blistered her fair cheeks. She was lying abed with a plaster of chalk and olive-oil over her face, and her sweet soul full of tempestuous indignation.

The snow was still lying an inch deep over the grass when Jeffray bowed over Sir Peter's gnarled and gouty hand, smiled sheepishly at Lot, and mounted his mare for Rodenham. Mists were creeping up the valleys, rolling over the woods like smoke, wiping out the blues and purples of the distance with steaming vapor. The high ground by Beacon Rock was still clear, while below the mist seemed like a gray sea beating upon the dark coast-line of the moors. Here and there a tall clump of trees stood out like a black and isolated rock in the midst of the water.

Richard had passed Beacon Rock and was in the fringe of the fog when a shrill cry came to him from a thicket of pines known as the Queen's Circle, standing on a knoll to the left of the road. He reined in to listen, the mist drifting about him in ragged eddies, raw and cold with the thawing snow. Richard could see the clump of trees towering dimly through the vapor. Angry voices came eddying over the moor. Jeffray could distinguish a woman's above the growling of the deeper undertones.

"Let him be, Dan, you coward!"

"Stand aside, wench—"

"Will you fight a mere lad? Off, you great coward! I'll hold him, David, run, lad, run!"

There was an angry uproar, an oath or two, the sound of men scuffling and struggling together. A woman's figure broke away suddenly through the moving mist, red cloaked, hood thrown back, black hair in a tangle. She came close to Jeffray's horse, her hands to her bosom, her white face straining towards the west. She ran up to him, snatched at his bridle, looking up fiercely in his face.

"Quick, or he'll murder him—"

"Who?"

"Black Dan. He's a devil when angry. Quick! You have pistols; give me one—"

She snatched one from Jeffray's holster, looked to the priming, and without so much as waiting for a word from him, darted away over the heather. Richard, as though compelled, turned his horse, clapped in the spurs, and followed. He could see two men struggling together in the mist under the trees. The girl was running towards them, brandishing her pistol, and shouting as she ran.

"Off, Dan, or I'll shoot ye. David, there's help coming. Take your hand off his throat, you devil."

The struggling figures swayed and fell of a sudden. Young David, with Dan's fist at his throat, had tripped the giant, and slipped free in the fall. Quick as a cat he broke away from his brother's clutches as they rolled on the ground, and scrambling up, took to his heels over the heather. Dan was up and after him like a plunging hound, shouting and cursing as he lumbered in pursuit. Before Bess had reached the trees they had both disappeared down the hill-side into the mist.

She turned suddenly and faced Jeffray, and held out the pistol to him by the stock as he rode up. He had recognized her as the girl he had seen under the beech-trees with the old woman tending pigs.

"Thanks for your pistol," she said, frankly, "David's broken away, and can run three yards to Dan's two. The lad will be safe enough now."

Jeffray had taken the pistol from her and thrust it back into the holster. He was studying her angry yet handsome face, framed by its glorious sheen of hair.

"What were they fighting about?" he asked.

Bess laughed, flashed a look at him out of her fierce eyes.

"About me," she said.

"You?"

"Yes. I must run home to warn Ursula and old Isaac. Good-night."

She swung away suddenly over the heather, leaving Jeffray as though he had known since birth who Dan and David, Isaac and old Ursula were. The man watched her tall figure melt into the mist, wondering the while who this wild elf could be. Regaining the road, he trotted on again towards Rodenham, keeping a sharp watch upon the misty woods. That same evening he called Peter Gladden, the butler, to him in the library, and drew from the old man all he knew concerning the woodlanders who lived in the forest of Pevensel.

V

The great drawing-room at Rodenham was full of candles, powdered heads and waving feathers, gentlemen in purple, red, or blue, dames in gorgeous gowns and swelling hoops. The room had been the prior's parlor of old, and still retained its slender pillars capped with foliage, its deeply moulded groins, its many vaults, now painted azure and crusted with silver stars. Candles were ranged around the walls in sconces between the long, gilded mirrors that made the room look like a magician's maze. The panelling was painted after the French fashion with Cupids, garlands, and festoons of flowers. The furniture was also French, Louis Quinze; fauteuils, canopies carved and gilt and covered with tapestry; handsome commodes; here a fantastic buhl-table, or a chased and inlaid escritoire. There were two fireplaces in the long and curious room, both with oak logs stacked upon their burnished irons.

Richard Jeffray was entertaining some of his Sussex neighbors under the especial patronage of the Lady Letitia. The Hardacre coach had rolled over the priory bridge before dusk to deposit Sir Peter, Mr. Lancelot and the fair Jilian at Richard's porch. The Perkabys, of Rookhurst, were present with their three sleepily handsome daughters, dark odalisques who spoke slowly and looked love. Dr. Sugg bustled to and fro in his best gown, beaming upon every one, and shaking the powder out of his full-bottomed wig. Squire Bilson had driven over with his wife and son from Marling to take snuff with Squire Rokeley of Marvelscombe, whose harriers were the boast of all the Sussex Nimrods. Some half a score lesser folk completed the assemblage—a lawyer, a few young gentlemen of sporting tastes, Mary Sugg, Dr. Sugg's daughter, and several elderly ladies whose plumes nearly swept the star-dusted ceiling.

Richard in black, with white silk stockings and silver buckled shoes, his hair powdered and caught up at the back with a black velvet bow, stood behind his aunt's chair as the guests came to pay their respects to the venerable dowager. The Lady Letitia might have stood for the high priestess of fashion with her immense toupé, her gorgeous damasks, her rouge and patches, her diamonds and her portentous fan. It was the Lady Letitia herself who had devised the "rout," her nephew having consented in the innocence of his heart. He had never seen the Lady Letitia campaigning before, and had no notion of the strategies and ambuscades she had planned that night. From the moment that the first guest had been announced by Peter Gladden, the dowager had taken the function to herself, and ousted her nephew from all premiership or authority.

The elder men had gathered about one of the fires, and were discussing the past hunting season, Squire Rokeley posing as chief mentor and critic. The ladies were

bobbing their plumes, smirking and chattering together, while Miss Julia Perkaby, who had been besought by the Lady Letitia with much graciousness to seat herself at the harpsichord, thrilled the assemblage with her rich contralto. Miss Jilian Hardacre had established herself on a causeuse by the wall, with Mr. Richard standing by her, looking aristocratic and even distinguished in his black coat, frilled shirt, knee-breeches and silk stockings.

Miss Jilian was a plump and comely woman, with masses of auburn hair decked out with artificial flowers and ribbons, a pair of experienced gray eyes, a full bosom and a simpering red mouth. She wore a white gown flowered with violets, a green hoop, white satin slippers, an abundance of lace, and a chain of garnets about her throat. There were three patches upon her face, one above the delightful dimple on her left cheek, one to the right of the round chin, another above her right eyebrow. But for a slight thinness of the neck, the sternomastoid muscles showing too patently, and some faint wrinkles about the eyes, Miss Jilian contradicted the Lady Letitia's insinuations very charmingly.

Richard, bending over this delightful morsel of old-world perfume and affectation, was unbosoming himself of delicate inquiries as to her health.

"I hope you have been afflicted with no more headaches," he was asking with true lover-like solicitude. "Sir Peter appeared uncommonly distressed about you a week ago."

Miss Jilian's gray eyes searched Richard's face suspiciously for the moment. Had that wretch Lot told him the truth about that horrible cosmetic? No. The lad was as ingenuous and sincere as any Galahad.

"La, Richard," she said, fluttering her ivory fan painted with Cupids and peacocks, "it is strange that you should remember the days when I keep my bed."

"Are they not sunless days?" quoth Mr. Richard, with a fine bow.

"Oh, Richard, I am sure you are poking fun at me."

"Are you not the Sussex sun, Jilian?"

"Oh, cousin, how can you say such things? La, Miss Perkaby is singing; we must cease our chatter."

Miss Hardacre spread her fan and screened the bold mortal from the glow of her luminous countenance. Richard could see a round white chin and a mass of auburn hair.

"I would rather hear you talk, Jilian. I cannot think why Aunt Letitia asked the girl to sing. She has a fine voice, though, but—not half so fine as yours."

A gray eye peeped demurely over the ivory screen.

"Do you think so, cousin?"

"Of course I think so, Jilian."

A loud burst of laughter came from the farther end of the room, marring the melody like an ass braying. It was Lot's laugh, a blatant and self-assertive

expression of merriment that seemed to stand in need of being passed through some refining sieve. Richard glanced at the gay coated gentlemen about the fire, a cordon of purple, red, and blue, and noticed that his cousin's protuberant blue eyes appeared fixed upon Jilian and himself. Richard blushed as though all the ladies in the room were studying him. He stood up and drew a little apart from Miss Jilian as the Lady Letitia came sailing down upon them like a gorgeous galleon freighted with all the spices of India and the silks of China.

His aunt's air of extreme amiability towards Miss Hardacre puzzled Jeffray not a little. She darted a look at him, seated herself beside the fair Jilian, and desired her nephew to go and talk to Mrs. Perkaby and her daughters. Richard departed in all innocence, leaving these instinctive and inveterate enemies together on the causeuse. They were soon chatting and smiling, sparring and feinting at each other with that admirable and hypocritical amiability that makes men marvel. The dowager's keen eyes were subjecting Miss Hardacre's person and toilet to a minute and insolent examination. She talked effusively the while to that young lady, a malicious innuendo or half-veiled snub in every sentence.

"I hope to take Richard to The Wells with me," said the Lady Letitia, staring steadily in Miss Hardacre's face. "My nephew is a generous lad, but very gauche and inexperienced. It is my wish that Richard should see what elegant and modish people are like. He is wasted—stifled—you must perceive, Miss Hardacre, in this quagmire of a county."

Miss Jilian's gray eyes glittered. She was no novice in the fine art of polite insolence, and knew enough of the world to recognize the string that worked the Lady Letitia's tongue.

"I wish Cousin Richard joy of so experienced a school-mistress," she said, tartly; "he himself has confessed to me, madam, that he does not love the fashionable world."

Aunt Letitia tilted her Roman nose.

"Truth, Miss Hardacre, I think you misread the lad's meaning. He referred to country fashions; and who can blame him? La, dear Miss Perkaby is about to sing again; a divine voice, and such grace and breeding," and the Lady Letitia sat in stately silence through the song with a beatific appreciative smirk upon her bedizened face.

"Delicious," she chattered at the end, bowing and beaming at Miss Julia Perkaby; "the lass has such soul. My dear nephew dotes on Miss Perkaby's singing, and he is forever humming her songs over to himself. And do you sing, my dear?"

Miss Hardacre, flushed and angry, answered that she did.

"And Richard never told me. What a memory the lad has! Upon my soul, Miss Hardacre, the simpleton informed me that your hair was nut brown, when I can see with my own eyes how much gold there is in it. My poor nephew's pate is always stuffed full of poetry. I expect that you have found him very absent-minded at times,

my dear."

Miss Hardacre's cheeks were covered with a rare bloom, and she looked as though it would have afforded her exquisite pleasure to slap the Lady Letitia's face.

"I find Cousin Richard very intelligent," she retorted; "he has read some of his poetry to me. I can admire his genius, madam, though I do not pretend to be clever."

The dowager elevated her eyebrows and nodded.

"Indeed!" she said, with a chuckle, "why, the lad must read his poetry to half the girls in the county. Mary Sugg, I have heard the doctor say, compares his verse to Spenser's. Of course, my dear Miss Hardacre, Richard must find a woman of your mature years a most discerning critic."

"Then, madam," said the younger lady, with a toss of the head, "you must hear a great deal of Mr. Richard's poetry?"

"I, my dear? I cannot abide the stuff. The dear lad showed me a little poem he had written on a certain young lady," and the dowager beamed; "a young lady—well, I must not give away the boy's secrets. It was all about dark eyes and raven locks, hearts and darts, love and dove. Terrible! All boys scribble this species of stuff, my dear. They discover a new goddess every month, and write poems about her cherry lips till a cherrier-lipped wench appears. By-the-way, who is that very over-dressed person—that young farmer fellow with his back to the fire?"

The Lady Letitia was indicating Mr. Lancelot with her fan. Again Miss Jilian's gray eyes glistened; she bit her red lip, and looked at the dowager with extreme disdain.

"That gentleman, madam, is my brother."

"Nonsense, my dear—"

"I assure you, madam, I know my own brother when I see him."

The Lady Letitia did not appear in the least disturbed.

"Ah, now I recognize a certain family likeness," she said. "Bless me, there is that wicked boy Richard making love to Miss Julia Perkaby. Hey! Is it not amusing to watch these young things coquetting? We women, Miss Hardacre, who have had our day, can afford to smile at the delightful follies of youth. Hem! What, supper-time already? I declare, there is Peter Gladden ready to announce it to us. I must find you a gentleman, my dear, to give you an arm. The young things will sort themselves as they think fit."

There appeared to be a conspiracy afoot that night to render Jeffray's hospitality obnoxious in every detail to the Hardacre folk. How was it that etiquette was so flagrantly outraged, that Mrs. Perkaby flaunted into the supper-room before a baronet's daughter, and that Richard found himself shackled to Miss Julia Perkaby by his aunt's machinations? How was it that Sir Peter was desired to give his arm to Mrs. Bilson, a lady who had slandered him outrageously on a certain occasion, and whom the baronet had detested ever since? How was it that Mr. Lot, whose

astonished eyes beheld Richard in possession of his own especial flame, Miss Perkaby, was sent down with Miss Sugg, poor Mary, whose yellow face was as plain as a millstone, and whose conversation consisted of prim and monosyllabic nothings? And how was it that Miss Jilian was abandoned to Dr. Sugg, the elderly spinster's refuge, and plumped down in an obscure corner? Never had so ill-assorted and tactless an affair been planned.

There was some wanton spirit whispering malicious suggestions about the board. Sir Peter gulped down his food, swore in serious silence, while Mrs. Bilson favored him with an occasional glare over her bony shoulder. Mr. Lot, surly and morose, watched Richard and Miss Julia Perkaby with jealous attention, while Mary Sugg shivered and twisted her fingers into knots at his elbow. Dr. Sugg attempted in vain to bring the sparkle of a smile to Miss Hardacre's outraged eyes. The Lady Letitia alone appeared amiable and garrulous and wholly at her ease. For the rest, a sulky and distraught silence possessed the majority of the guests.

The plot developed still further when the gentlemen left their wine to join the ladies in the drawing-room. Card-tables with candles, ivory markers, and packs of cards had been set out by Peter Gladden and the footmen. The Lady Letitia was astir on the instant, bustling about like some gorgeous bumble-bee, setting every one in order, taking the whole function to herself.

"Sir Peter would play whist; yes, and Mrs. Bilson was dying for a game. Dr. Sugg, will you partner me, please? We will challenge Mrs. Bilson and Sir Peter. Squire Rokeley, and you, Mr. Perkaby, will you two gentlemen arrange the other tables? No doubt the young folk would like to dance at the other end of the room. Mary will play for you on the harpsichord. Richard, dear, will you walk a minuet with Miss Julia Perkaby? Mrs. Perkaby, madam, I remember seeing your sweet daughter dance last season at The Wells. All the men were watching her—upon my soul, they were, madam. Miss Jilian, my dear, will you join the young folk, or take a hand at cards?"

Richard, helplessly obedient to his august relative's commands, walked a minuet with Miss Julia Perkaby, while Mr. Lot glared at him from a corner, and Miss Hardacre chatted to young Bilson, a spotty youth who was about to take up a commission in the Foot Guards. Miss Sugg's bony fingers tinkled rapidly over the notes, while Richard, hot and ill at ease, performed with the black-eyed and stately Julia, catching every now and again his cousin Lot's sulky stare and a glimpse of Miss Jilian's haughty face. More minuets and country-dances followed. Youth tripped it under the painted roof, curls jigged, fans flickered. The evening was well advanced before Richard found himself seated once again beside Miss Jilian on the causeuse by the wall.

He did not find Miss Hardacre in the most angelic of tempers. In truth, she tilted her chin at Mr. Richard, played restlessly with her fan, and appeared most relentlessly chilling. Jeffray, though he was ignorant of the Lady Letitia's treachery, yet felt that the evening had been miserably mismanaged. There stood Cousin Lot

looking as surly and as savage as an unpaid creditor, while fat Sir Peter glowered over his cards at Mrs. Bilson's funereal face. Miss Hardacre herself appeared clouded by the prevailing sulkiness, though there was an unpleasant glint in her sweet, gray eyes.

"La, Richard," she yawned, "you are not coming to sit by your cousin, surely? How hot the room is! I am sure it must be nearly time for us to go."

Miss Hardacre was plying her fan with rapid jerks, and staring contemptuously the while at the dark-eyed Miss Perkaby, who was smiling at Richard across the room.

"I hope you are not tired, Jilian?"

"Tired! I suppose I look a poor washed-out thing! I have nerves, sir, and a delicate body. It is those heavy women who can foot it till cock-crow. Miss Perkaby dances well, eh, cousin?"

Richard blushed.

"Does she?" he asked, helplessly, beginning to suspect what had angered this angel of a woman.

"Your dear aunt, sir, hinted that I am getting too old to dance."

"You—too old—to dance?"

"Yes. And did you notice, Richard, that I was sent down to supper with Dr. Sugg? So you read your poetry to Mary Sugg, cousin, eh? And write verses about Miss Julia Perkaby? Heavens, how hot the room is! I wish the butler would announce our coach."

Richard, pitifully bewildered, stared at Miss Jilian, and felt that the room was certainly overheated.

"I have never read my poems to Mary Sugg," he began.

Miss Jilian's lip curled.

"She thinks them equal to Spenser's, cousin."

"What! Did she tell you so?"

"Oh, dear, no; she is not so innocent."

Richard, very flushed and unhappy, began to suspect the Lady Letitia of mendacity. Mary Sugg had never seen his verses. And the dowager had talked for some time to Jilian, perhaps poisoning the girl's mind.

"My dear cousin—" he began.

"Won't you go and talk to Miss Perkaby, Richard? I am such a dull creature. Heavens! what is the matter with Sir Peter, yonder?"

A sudden hubbub had arisen at the Lady Letitia's table. The baronet, a look of overheated indignation on his face, had thrown down his cards and was taking snuff with great vigor. The Lady Letitia was turning over the tricks with a wicked smile in her eyes. Parson Sugg appeared flushed and uncomfortable, while Mrs. Bilson sat

bolt upright in her chair. The players at the other tables were glancing curiously at one another.

"Pardon me, Sir Peter."

"Pardon you, madam!"

"See. You did revoke. See, sir, you played a club here."

"Damn the club, madam!"

Mrs. Bilson uttered a little squeak of indignation, tilted her nose, and stared at the baronet with shocked pity.

"It is evident that my partner has made a mistake, Lady Letitia," she said, with unpleasant emphasis upon the error.

"Such mistakes will occur," said Dr. Sugg, mildly.

"I am afraid the wine was rather heavy, Sir Peter. I told Gladden to be chary of the port—"

The baronet flared up at last with righteous and disgusted wrath.

"What, madam! You hint that I am fuddled? I can see the pips as clear as you can."

"Sir Peter!"

"I think it is time that we laid down our cards," said Mrs. Bilson, rising.

"Exactly, madam. I heartily agree with you, madam," retorted the baronet, savagely, "whist is only fit for old women."

"Oh, Sir Peter!"

"Sir Peter!"

"Will you be so good as to ring for my coach, Richard Jeffray? Lot, Jilian, it is time we were moving. Lady Letitia, I kiss your hand. Gentlemen, good-night."

Jeffray had hurried forward with an expression of pain upon his face. He glanced angrily at the Lady Letitia, and followed Sir Peter, who had marched pompously out of the room. The baronet frowned at him and ignored the hand that Richard had extended.

"Order my coach, lad," was all he said.

"But, Sir Peter—"

They had reached the hall, and Richard, who had given his orders to Peter Gladden, turned to appease the angry baronet. Sir Peter, who had been bubbling with a seething sense of wrong, exploded his wrath in Richard's face.

"Don't ask me to any more of your infernal drums or routs," he said. "Those old women were for hinting that I cheated—cheated, sir, to pocket their damned miserly sixpences!"

"I am sure, Sir Peter—"

"Deuce take your sureness, sir. I tell you that painted old image of an aunt of

yours tricked us here, sir, to make fun of us before that old she-dog of a Bilson and the rest. Damme, sir, are we Hardacres to be set down to supper after all the Bilsons and Perkabys and nobodies in the county? Come, Jill, my lass, they sent you down with the snuffler, did they! Deuce take you, sir, my daughter ain't one to be treated as though she were born on a dung-heap and dragged up in a hovel!"

Richard, bewildered, shamed and very miserable, turned to Miss Hardacre with a piteous and boyish appeal in his dark eyes.

"I wish I had never given the party," he said.

"Thank you, cousin!"

"It was my aunt's doing."

"To be sure, little 'un," quoth Mr. Lot, with a glum grin, "and you didn't enjoy yourself at all, eh? Julia Perkaby's a fine wench, Richard. What! Don't know when a woman's got a pair of deuced fine eyes in her head?"

Mr. Lot laughed loudly and slapped Jeffray on the shoulder with a vigor that was not wholly inspired by cousinly regard. Peter Gladden was standing at the hall door with a lantern in his hand; the Hardacre coach-horses were pawing the gravel without.

"Come, Sir Peter, I don't think we are prime-beef here."

Richard was still gazing ruefully at Jilian, watching her enfold her auburn head in a light-blue wrapper.

"I am very sorry," he said, in a humble aside.

Miss Hardacre made him a fine courtesy.

"La, cousin, don't apologize," she said, "we have had a delicious evening. I am sure Miss Julia's dancing was superb."

VI

A sharp skirmish occurred in the great drawing-room that night after that stately chamber had been emptied of its guests. Richard, chafing under Sir Peter's honest outburst of wrath and Miss Jilian's ironical reproaches, charged the Lady Letitia with deliberately insulting these good people whom he had summoned to Rodenham in all the innocence of his heart. The Lady Letitia, throned on a brocaded fauteuil before the dying fire, regarded her nephew with amused contempt, and proceeded to convince him of the disinterested wisdom of her plot.

"You are a young greenhorn, my dear Richard," she said, playing with her great red fan, "and you may regard me, sir, as a fairy godmother sent by Heaven to draw you out of the toils. Come, perceive, sir, I have routed the Amalekites and thrown poison into that sweet spinster's rouge-pot. I wager, nephew, that Miss Hardacre will be for hating you cordially in a few days if you will only follow my advice."

But Richard was in no mood to listen to this arch-diplomat's ingenious proposals. Shorn of his natural passivity, he kindled commendably over the crisis, and paced the floor with all the authority of an admiral stalking his quarter-deck.

"May I suggest to you, madam, that I will permit no further meddling in my affairs?"

"Richard—!"

"What poisonous insinuations you have been pouring into Miss Hardacre's ears I cannot imagine. You have trifled with my honor, madam, disgraced my hospitality, and shamed me in my own house."

"Richard Jeffray!"

"Permit me to add, madam, that I will not have my friends slighted and insulted in Rodenham."

"Heavens, Richard!"

"This is my house, madam. If you do not approve of my tastes and habits you can mend your displeasure by departing."

The old lady sat and stared at her nephew, nodding her huge "head," her little eyes twinkling under their bushy brows. She would not have believed that the lad had so much spirit in him. His eyes sparkled, his face had flushed, and he carried himself with an angry stateliness that was worthy of Mr. Garrick.

"My dear Richard," she said, rising, puffing herself out like an old hen, "I think we had better dismiss the subject till your temper has cooled in the morning. May I request you to ring for my maid?"

Jeffray stalked to the bell rope, jerked it savagely, and bowed grandly to his

aunt.

"May I wish your ladyship a very good-night?"

The dowager extended her hand, and suffered the lad to touch her gouty fingers crowded thick with rings.

"My dear nephew," she said, not unkindly, "you have a good heart, but—"

"Well, madam?"

"You will confess some day that your old aunt was a woman of sense and discretion. Marry the sweet Jilian, my dear. After all, it is no business of mine. But, my dear Richard, if you discover that you have embraced a bag of bones, a bundle of affectations, blame yourself and not me. Why, that Perkaby girl would make a better match; she has a body, an uncommon fine and handsome body, and old Perkaby can lay down guineas. But I see I weary your delicate sense of honor. Bon soir, mon cher Richard."

The clock in the turret had told ten next morning when Richard mounted his black mare and cantered off through the park to take the sandy road that wound through Pevensel. He was still feverishly ashamed of the unfortunate incidents of the previous night, and was as much disgusted with the Lady Letitia's logic as with his own pusillanimous stupidity. Miss Hardacre had been slighted, insulted in his own house. Sir Peter, that kind but peppery old gentleman, had been driven to retreat in justifiable indignation. Richard Jeffray, sensitive and generous-hearted youth, still chafed and fumed under the indignity of it all. His duty lay clear before him as he rode through the waving wilds of Pevensel, and saw the sunlight chase the shadows over the dusky woods.

Sir Peter and Mr. Lancelot were out with the hounds that morning, and had ridden to draw Squire Rokeley's covers at Marvelscombe. Miss Hardacre was at home, however, so said the fat major-domo, grinning benignly over the apparent coincidence. Jeffray left his mare in the hands of a stable-boy, and, throwing his whip, gloves, and hat on a table in the hall, prepared to confront the sweet angel whom his aunt had tortured on the preceding night. Miss Jilian was sitting before her embroidery frame in the red parlor when the major-domo announced Richard Jeffray. Curious to relate, Miss Hardacre did not start up in amazement on catching the name from old Roger's lips. So the dear lad had ridden over to protest his innocence and to make peace? Miss Jilian had expected it.

"La, cousin," she said, rising up with much stately rustlings of silk as the door closed on the major-domo, "I never thought to see you here."

Richard came forward blushing, and was even permitted to kiss Miss Hardacre's hand. Certainly Miss Jilian drew her fingers away somewhat hastily, and carried her auburn head with proper coldness and dignity.

"I have ridden over to ask your pardon, Jilian."

"Pardon, cousin?"

"For the miserable affair last night. Aunt Letitia and I quarrelled after every one

had gone, and I am afraid I lost my temper. I lay awake all night wondering what I should say to you in the morning."

The lad looked very generous and very handsome as he stood there blushing, his dark eyes full of ardent light and all the sincerity of his heart quivering upon his words. Miss Hardacre still held her head in the air, tapped on the floor with one red-slippered foot, and was ready to pretend that she was not in the least eager for a reconciliation.

"I am sure this is very good of you, cousin," she said, tartly; "I did not expect you here to-day. In fact, Sir Peter ordered me—"

She hesitated of a sudden, blushed very charmingly, and gave Mr. Richard an eloquent glimpse of her gray eyes.

"Sir Peter ordered you, Jilian?"

"Not to receive Mr. Richard Jeffray unless—"

"Unless?"

"He could explain away the insults that were heaped upon our family last night."

Miss Hardacre had sunk gracefully into the window-seat, her melting eyes downcast towards her knees. There was infinite pensiveness in the pose of her fair head. Richard, thinking her adorable for the moment, made so bold as to seat himself beside her. How proud and yet how sensitive she was! Poor child, how was it that the Lady Letitia could abuse her so?

"Upon my honor, Jilian, I was utterly miserable when you went away last night."

Miss Hardacre's fingers were plucking at her gown. She did not so much as look at the lad, but hung her head like a statue of grieved and injured innocence.

"Won't you believe me, Jilian?"

"Oh, Richard—"

"Cousin, dear cousin, how can I express my own shame and distress?"

"Then, Richard, you did not want to dance with Julia Perkaby?"

"Confound the girl. It was Aunt Letitia who forced me into it."

"And you did not write poetry about her, and adore her singing?"

Richard burst forth into manly indignation.

"Jilian, who told you all these lies?"

Miss Hardacre sighed and began to finger her handkerchief.

"I don't think I ought to say, Richard."

"It was Aunt Letitia. I'll swear it was Aunt Letitia. Damn the old woman, Jilian, I absolutely hate her!"

"Richard! Richard!"

"Then it was Aunt Letitia?"

“She was very cruel to me, Richard.”

“On my honor, cousin, I’ll go back and turn her out of my house.”

Here came Miss Hardacre’s supreme opportunity. What more affecting and delightful a virtue than that sweet spirit of forgiveness that juggles divinely with the proverbial coals of fire. Miss Jilian bear malice? No, the gods forbid! She would plead with her dear cousin, soothe his angry passions, stem the torrent of his wrath that threatened to descend upon the devoted dowager’s head. The Lady Letitia was a very old woman, and alas! my dear cousin, very worldly. She had her whims and her prejudices, and her temper had been rasped by the tooth of time. Naturally the Lady Letitia was ambitious for her dear nephew; who would not be ambitious for such a nephew as Richard Jeffray? The Lady Letitia had prejudices in favor of money. Could Richard blame her if she strove to save him from the “designs” of a poor baronet’s daughter, a country mouse who had no adornments save those simple virtues with which nature had endowed her unaffected soul?

What wonder that Richard, chivalrous lad, pressed Miss Hardacre’s hand to his lips, and vowed that no more beautiful and forgiving spirit had ever chastened mortal flesh. What wonder that the reconciliation was complete between them, and that Miss Jilian consented to sing her songs. How much more finely she sang than that stupid giantess, Julia Perkaby! “La, cousin Dick, you must not call young ladies names.” Might he not read his epic poem to her? “Oh, Richard, I am such an ignorant little thing. Listen? I could listen all day. I am sure you are a genius, Richard. Mr. Pope and Mr. Dryden never wrote half such fine verses as yours.” What wonder that Richard Jeffray departed from Hardacre that day, convinced in his heart that he was in love with his adorable cousin. Why, she was an angel. How could Aunt Letitia fabricate such monstrous and malignant lies?

When the purple shadow of the Beacon Rock fell athwart the crisp turf that afternoon, Richard remembered, even in his state of exaltation, the glowing face and fierce blue eyes of the fair savage of the woods. Old Peter Gladden had told his master all he knew concerning the forest-folk whose hamlet lurked in the midst of Pevensel. Richard remembered the place vaguely as a scattering of stone-roofed cottages sunk in the shadows of the woods. He had often explored the rides and wood-ways of Pevensel as a boy, and had even taken young owls from a ruined tower of the Abbey of Holy Cross. A sudden whim seized him that day to follow the bridle-track that branched off by the Beacon Rock, and led close, so old Gladden said, by the hamlet in the woods. It would lead him out by White Hind walk on the broad coaching-road to Lewes.

No sooner had the whim tickled Richard’s sensibilities for romance than he was off at a trot down the bridle-track, seeing the Queen’s Circle sink down on his left below the slope of the open moor. The sun came slanting through and through as Richard wound through the solemn thickets, where the dead bracken glowed under the purple shade, and whin, whortleberries, and heather tangled each knoll and dell. There was a beckoning awe about the place, a brooding mystery that lured on and

on.

Now Bess had wandered out, while old Ursula was taking a nap in the ingle-nook, to search for certain herbs that the old lady needed. She had thrown her red cloak over her shoulders, taken a rush-basket and a stout thorn stick. Three weeks or more had passed since the scrimmage in the pine thicket, and young David, fearing Dan's wrath, had fled the hamlet, tramped down to Portsmouth, and been "pressed" for the king's navy. Isaac Grimshaw had had the news from a Jew peddler who had come through by Chichester, and had seen young David dragged out of a tavern by the press men, and hauled off with others to the harbor. The Jew peddler knew all the forest-folk by name and face, having sold his wares to them and obliged Isaac in many ways, year in, year out. There had been hot words between old Isaac and his son, and hot words between Isaac and Dame Ursula. Bess had called Black Dan a coward and a bully to his face. But since the mischief was done, and young David on the seas, Isaac calmed the contentions of his flock, and mollified the women as best he could.

Dan Grimshaw had followed Bess from the hamlet that day with sullen fire in his red-brown eyes. There had been words between them in the morning, and the girl had treated the giant to a picturesque display of scorn. Dan Grimshaw was ugly enough, but it did not please him to hear the truth from Miss Bess's petulant lips. He had blundered home to his cottage in bovine wrath, inflamed by the girl's comeliness, and by her passionate taunts. Sly and savage he had watched her take the path that led up through the woods to Beacon Rock, and had followed at a distance, clinching his great fists as he saw her red cloak flit amid the trees.

Jeffray, riding down White Hind walk where the hamlet path crossed the sleek grass that seemed to run like a river amid the trees, was edified by beholding a tall wench belaboring a forester with a stick. The man was dodging from side to side, cursing and taking the blows upon his forearms. A basket half filled with sprouting weeds lay tossed aside under a tree. So busy were these two Pevensel savages with their stick-wielding and their dodging that neither of them noticed Richard's approach.

Of a sudden, however, the scene took on a more sinister expression. The man had caught the stick and twisted it out of the girl's hand. Jeffray could distinguish his inflamed and passionate face even at a distance of fifty paces. In another instant the man's arms were about the girl's body, and she was writhing and struggling like a hound hugged to the hairy bosom of a bear.

Richard, who had recognized the elf of the Queen's Circle, pricked in his spurs, and went cantering down the ride. He rolled out of the saddle when close upon the pair, left his mare loose, and, drawing his sword, ran towards Dan Grimshaw and Miss Bess. The girl had one hand on the man's throat, and was beating the other in his face. He had picked her up bodily and was holding her in mid-air when Richard's shout startled his hairy ears.

Black Dan dropped Bess upon the grass, and, being mad as any antlered stag

baffled by a hunter, snatched up the girl's stick and made at Richard with savage good-will. Jeffray's pretty bodkin of a blade was smitten away out of his hand, and he himself was brought low with heavy cut across the crown. Black Dan, his face as like a flesh-eating ogre's as any nursemaid might paint for the intimidation of the young, stood over Richard as though tempted to strike again. He was balked in his charitable purpose, however, by finding Bess fronting him with a pistol in either hand. She had caught Jeffray's mare, and plucked the pistols from the holsters, their master having forgotten the good barkers in the full flux of chivalry.

"Touch him, Dan, and I'll shoot you, you devil."

In truth, a fine stage effect, Belphœbe rescuing Timias from the wrath of the savage of the woods!

VII

Dan's fury cooled out of him as he looked at the white face half hidden by a grass tussock, and caught a glint of the polished barrels of Bess's pistols. Jeffray's beaver had fallen off, and he lay with the blood soaking from a scalp-wound into his hair. Dan drew back, swinging his stick, and staring sheepishly at the blood trickling across Jeffray's forehead.

Bess, seeing that Dan had come to his senses, put back one of the pistols into the holster, but kept the other in her hand. She ordered Dan back, and kneeling down on the wet grass turned Jeffray's head gently into her lap. A look of wonder flashed into her eyes as she considered his face, for this was the man St. Agnes had showed her in her dream. He even wore black, with white ruffles at his wrists, and his blood had been spilled for her in saving her from Dan's savagery.

She looked wonderingly at Jeffray, remembering him at last as the gentleman who had ridden by when Dan and David were fighting in the mist by the Queen's Circle. The sight of the blood trickling across his forehead roused her from such reveries to womanly pity. She flashed a glance at Dan, and bade him give her the scarf he wore about his neck. With this she bound up Jeffray's head, smoothing back his hair with her strong brown hands.

"Take him up," she said to Dan; "we must carry him home to Mother Ursula."

Dan was swinging his stick and watching Bess holding Jeffray's head in her lap with a sullen jealousy that he could not dissemble. He obeyed the girl, however, and lifted Jeffray as though he had been a child. Bess picked up the fallen sword, and taking Jeffray's mare by the bridle, pointed to the path that led towards the hamlet.

Old Ursula held up her hands when Dan appeared at her cottage door with Jeffray still unconscious in his arms. Bess told her foster-mother all that had happened, not deigning to spare Dan shame in the telling of it. They laid Jeffray on the settle before the fire, and sent in haste for Isaac, who knew all the gentry by sight who lived within ten miles of the Beacon Rock.

Isaac, sleek and authoritative, cursed Dan when he recognized the Squire of Rodenham.

"Dan 'll swing for it," quoth Ursula, with an unloving glance at her nephew.

"Bah, there's no great harm done. Get him to bed, dame, and when he wakes see that you put the youngster in a good temper."

Isaac beckoned his son away, Ursula hobbling off to drag clean sheets from the linen-press. Calling Bess, who was watching Jeffray, she bade her fetch a new blanket and the best quilt from the oak chest on the stairs. Isaac had taken Jeffray's mare, and, still rating Dan, stabled her in the byre where Ursula kept her cows.

The old woman pattered into her bedroom on the ground floor, dragged the clothes from the four-poster, while Bess came in bearing a new blanket and a patchwork quilt of many colors. Between them they spread the clean sheets, stripped off Jeffray's clothes, and put him to bed there in his shirt. Ursula made a stew of friar's-balsam, and after tearing soft linen into strips, washed Jeffray's wound and bound up his head. Then she went out to speak with Isaac in the kitchen, leaving Bess alone to watch by the bed.

It was growing dark when Jeffray recovered consciousness, and awoke to find great beams above his head, and the sunset reddening the narrow casement of a room. He fingered his bandaged head, looked round him curiously, and would have struggled up in the bed but for the swooping of Bess's strong brown hand upon his shoulder. She had been sitting there silently in the twilight, thinking of the dream she had dreamed on St. Agnes's Eve, and studying Jeffray's pale and inanimate face.

At his wakening she had set her hand upon his shoulder, as though to hint that he was under fair protection. Old Ursula had whispered to the girl that she was to be polite, nay, servile, to the gentleman, since the Squire of Rodenham might prove a troublesome neighbor should he care to charge Dan with violence. Servility, however, was not part of Bess's nature. She did not even call Mr. Richard "sir," and though she abated her masterfulness, she spoke to him as to an equal.

"Bide still," she said, leaning over him and looking in his eyes, "you are safe with us."

Richard could see the girl's face in the dusk, white beneath the dead black hair. There was the deliciousness of youth in the rare roundness of her cheek, the smooth low forehead, the strong chin and pouting mouth.

"Where am I?" he asked her, quietly, with his hands lying on the many-colored quilt.

"In our cottage—Ursula's cottage. I made Dan carry you home from the woods."

"Ah, I had the worst of it. What happened? Tell me."

Bess was pleased with his voice.

"Dan hit you over the head," she said.

"I can believe that," quoth Richard, with a smile.

"I picked your pistols out of the holsters, and swore I would shoot him if he struck you again."

Jeffray's thoughts were not of himself for the moment. He lay silent, looking up at Bess, still feeling the pressure of her hand upon his shoulder. The room was growing very dark. He could see only her hair as a deep shadow above the white oval of her face.

"You are one of the forest-folk?" he asked.

“I am Bess—Bess Grimshaw.”

“And Ursula?”

“Is my mother. I live with her.”

“And Dan—?”

“Is my cousin.”

The tawny light had melted out of the sky. From the kitchen came the murmur of Isaac’s voice as he argued with old Ursula. They were speaking of Richard and of Dan. The same subjects were in Bess’s thought, and perhaps the man in the bed divined the same.

“Bess,” he said, suddenly, calling her by her Christian name as he would have called a child.

She started and bent over him, leaning more heavily upon his shoulder.

“What happened to David?”

She seemed puzzled for the moment, and then flushed up redly in the dusk.

“David ran away,” she said.

“Yes.”

“He was terrified of Dan. They pressed him at Portsmouth for the king’s navy. We heard it from a peddler who had seen the lad marched off.”

They were both silent for a while, Richard’s eyes turned towards the window, Bess’s hand still on Jeffray’s shoulder. The same thoughts were in either heart. By some strange flash of sympathy Jeffray and the girl seemed to understand each other.

“Are you afraid of your cousin?” he asked, suddenly.

“Of Dan?”

“Yes.”

She looked down into the man’s face.

“I shall carry a knife,” she said, with peculiar significance. “I am a match for Dan—”

“I will leave you my pistols.”

Then came the pattering of Dame Ursula’s slippers across the flagged floor of the kitchen. The door opened and Bess of the Woods was called away.

Isaac Grimshaw was something of a sylvan diplomat, a suave, sweet-voiced old sinner, who could bleat texts or snarl out fantastic oaths as the emergency required. He had sworn at Dan for laying his hands on one of the gentry and risking his bull neck for a wench’s lips, and had driven his giant of a son cowering from old Ursula’s cottage. Then he had entered in and preached to the dame in the ingle-nook, wagging a long forefinger and brushing his white hair back from his forehead. Squire Jeffray must be appeased, tickled into a good temper. That was the mark towards which Isaac winged his words.

In due course he took the two candles in the brass sticks from the mantle-shelf, and lighting them with a fagot from the fire, bade Ursula open the bedroom door and call Bess out. The patriarch went in mincingly, set one candle on a table by the bed, and the other on an oaken press. He stood very humbly before Richard Jeffray, his white hair waving over his forehead, his clean-shaven mouth sweet and benignant as the mouth of some tender-souled old priest.

"I trust your honor is feeling comfortable."

"Not much the worse, Grimshaw, for your son's stick."

Isaac rubbed his palms together and beamed.

"I have come to ask your honor's pardon, sir."

The patriarch sniffed pathetically, and fidgeted as he stood with limp humbleness beside the bed. How could Jeffray appear angry with such an old fellow whose soul was overwhelmed in contrition for his son's misdeeds.

"Do not vex yourself, Grimshaw, on my account," said the master of Rodenham, frankly, "your son's blood was up, and I drew my sword on him. He is a dangerous fellow, Grimshaw, and beyond your handling, I imagine."

Isaac bowed his head into his hands.

"The Lord help me, sir," he said, sobbing, "he's a wild lad, your honor, but not bad at heart."

"This may be a lesson to him, Grimshaw."

"Please God, sir, it will. Bess, sir, Bess is a good wench, but she has a tongue that would drive a young man crazy."

"I don't blame her, Grimshaw, so far as your son is concerned."

"Dear Heaven, no, your honor. I will see to it, sir; I will speak to Dan like a father. He shall not pester the wench, and she shall be taught to bridle her tongue."

"If she has a temper, Grimshaw, you can best mend it by teaching your son to mind his business."

"True, your honor, true; it is good to hear you speak so kindly."

Jeffray lay quiet a moment, while Isaac still sniffed and fidgeted beside the bed, watching the master of Rodenham with his shrewd, gray eyes. Old Ursula was clattering her pans in the kitchen, humming some old ditty, while Bess, her brown hands white with flour, was making pastry for Squire Jeffray's supper.

"Grimshaw," said the younger man, at last.

"Sir?"

"I shall not set the law against your son."

"God bless your honor's noble heart."

"If there is more trouble betwixt him and the girl—"

Isaac Grimshaw was all reverent attention.

"You may like to find a good home for her—"

"Ah—your honor—"

"Well?"

"We should sorely miss her pretty face."

"Better lose her than have her ruined, Grimshaw."

"The words of a prophet, sir."

"We could take her at Rodenham. Old Mrs. Barbara, my butler's wife, could give her a good home."

Had Richard Jeffray seemed less innocent a youth, Isaac might have winked at him, and grown gay over so disinterested a proposal. Old Grimshaw was a fair connoisseur of rogues, and his instincts told him that Jeffray was not of the intriguing order. Therefore he made Richard a very humble and grateful speech, and declared he would keep such a benefactor's advice in mind. "Deuce take me," he thought, "here is an honest simpleton. Why, the lad needs no more bribing to be generous than a drunken Paddy. He'll grow fat on sentiment, without a morsel of real kissing to put him into a good temper."

Jeffray discovered himself served royally in Ursula Grimshaw's cottage that night. Isaac had sent a chicken, his best cutlery, and silver forks and a flask of wine, bidding his sister serve up a supper fit for a city alderman. There was red wine, white meat, nutty bread, savory herbs, custard and sugared fruits. Bess tricked out in her best green gown, with a white lawn apron, red stockings and shoes, and a silver chain set with amethysts about her throat, waited on the master of Rodenham as though to serve him were her whole heart's desire. She drank wine with Richard, showed her white teeth, courtesied and blushed when he thanked her and old Ursula for their courtesies. She smoothed his pillow, talked to him in her quaint, bold way, and altogether reconciled Richard to his lodging for the night. Solomon Grimshaw, Isaac's brother, had ridden over on his pony to Rodenham to ease the Lady Letitia of any anxiety on her nephew's account. Bess had brought Jeffray a quill, inkhorn, and paper, and stood by the bed watching the man's clever hand at work. He was a being full of strangeness and mystery to this forest elf, who had learned to look on men of coarser fibre. There was a frank yet courtly simplicity about Jeffray that charmed all women and made them trust him. The world-wise among them might think him a fool, and such folly women easily forgive.

Thus it befell that Bess of the Woods and Richard Jeffray stepped for the first time into that subtle maze of circumstance whose weavings spell out the passionate strangeness of tragedy. Had not Isaac counselled Dame Ursula to bewitch Squire Jeffray into as noble a temper as statecraft would permit? And what more pleasant to the eyes of youth than the unfolding beauty of a buxom girl?

About bedtime old Ursula clattered in the kitchen, coughed, and stamped up the wooden stairs. She would sleep with Bess that night, since the young squire had her bed. Bess, unaffected as could be, bent over Richard to smooth his pillow. She

looked at him a moment with a queer light in her eyes, and then—stooping, kissed his lips.

"That's for my sake," she said, with a half-frightened laugh. "Dan would have had it but for you."

She fled away, red as fire, and closed the door very gently after her. Richard heard her climb the stairs. He lay awake for many hours, listening to the wind in the trees without, as the candles burned down towards their sockets.

VIII

Jeffray slept till after the sun was up, and was awakened by Bess tapping at his door. She came in blushing, looking very coy and winsome, with a bowl of hot milk on a pewter dish, milk that her own brown hands had drawn from the cow that morning. It was quite an uncommon mood in Bess, this shy and half stately air of aloofness, with its smooth tones and its half-abashed tenderness in the eyes. She gave Jeffray a very quiet good-morning, asked how he had slept, blushing still as she remembered their parting on the preceding night.

To Richard, he knew not why, there was a peculiar fascination in the girl's presence, in the very nearness of her body to his. Their hands had touched as she held out the bowl of milk to him, and the silky coldness of her skin had discharged a species of subtle magnetism at the contact. He looked up into her face, saw the subdued light of the room intensify the richness of her coloring and enhance the lustrous shadows in her eyes. In truth, Bess's eyes and Mr. Richard's were always meeting that morning, so that one or the other would redden and look away. Jeffray, where he lay, could watch the girl through the open door as she glided to and fro in the kitchen. How tall and strong she was, how full of the delicious ardor of life, supple, swift, perfect in every outline. Big of body though she was, her long legs carried her with the swinging grace of an athletic male. She kept her mouth tightly shut in repose, her intense blue eyes shining out from her ruddy face.

Jeffray, finding himself little the worse for Dan's cudgelling, had hardly risen, dressed, and shaved himself with one of Isaac's razors, when Peter Gladden appeared with the patriarch before Ursula's cottage, inquiring for the person of his master. The Lady Letitia herself was waiting for Richard in her coach below the Beacon Rock. Jeffray tied his cravat, buckled on his sword, and went out to speak with Peter Gladden in the kitchen. Isaac Grimshaw was there also, humble, benignant and subservient. Bess, seated on a settle by the fire, was mending the gown that had been torn in the scuffle with Dan yesterday.

Richard shook Isaac Grimshaw's hand, bowed to old Ursula, and laid three guineas surreptitiously upon the table.

"I thank you for all your kindness," he said, with a glance that was meant for Bess.

Isaac, bowing, and rubbing his hands together, declared that they were proud to have been able to serve such a gentleman.

"As for the money, your honor," he said, "we cannot take the gold. What we have given—we have given gladly. Eh, dame, ain't that so?"

Old Ursula, whose eyes had twinkled at the sight of gold, courtesied and

confessed a little sourly that “Squire Jeffray was very welcome.”

Richard blushed, looked from one to the other, and repocketed his money.

“I shall not forget your kindness,” he said, simply. “If I can ever serve you, Grimshaw, remember what I said to you last night.”

Peter Gladden had gone to saddle and bridle Richard’s mare in the cow-house, and Jeffray proceeded to shake hands again very graciously with Isaac and old Ursula. His heart had been touched by what appeared to him to be simple and unsophisticated kindness; he had not learned to look below the surface of life as yet. He hesitated before Bess, who had risen and was standing looking at her hood that hung upon the key of the linen-press.

“Will you show us the path through the woods?” he asked her.

Isaac was for offering his services, but a gesture from old Ursula restrained him.

“The lass will be proud,” quoth the dame, amiably. “I would go with ye myself, sir, but for the rheumatics. Bess, get your cloak, lass, and go with the gentleman.” And in a whisper into the girl’s ear: “If he is for giving you the guineas, girl, take ’em, and don’t forget it.”

Now, Richard Jeffray sent Peter Gladden on ahead with the mare that morning, thus casting doubt on his sincerity in asking for guidance through the woods. He walked with Bess, who had thrown her red cloak over her shoulders and thrust her feet into her best buckled shoes. The woods were full of dancing sunlight and of dew. A brisk breeze played through the branches, chanting desirously, and sweeping the white clouds over the forest in the blue sky above. The promise of spring seemed in the air; already the green gorse was budding gold, and the cry of the world’s youth was on the wind.

Richard noticed for the first time that Bess was taller than he was as they walked together under the trees. Her eyes looked down on him a little from under her glorious wreath of sable hair. In truth, she seemed Richard’s master in the matter of mere physical strength; her arms were of greater girth than his by two inches or more, and her supple body would have turned the scale by a stone against Jeffray’s slim but wiry frame. They had little to say to each other for the first furlong or so. The girl appeared farouche and silent, looking at Richard as though half in awe of him. And yet some subtle net of sympathy seemed to have been cast about them both in the course of a single night.

“Bess,” said the man, suddenly plunging towards the thoughts that lay close about his heart.

Being slightly ahead, she hung back and waited, with her eyes at gaze on the deeps of the woods.

“I spoke to Isaac Grimshaw about you last night,” he continued, watching the play of the sunlight upon her face.

“About me?”

“Yes, and Dan, your cousin.”

Bess’s eyes darkened and she pouted out her lips. Her walk seemed more spirited, the carriage of her head more rebellious at the mention of Dan’s name.

“I told your uncle that Barbara Gladden, my butler’s wife, could give you a home at Rodenham—”

“At Rodenham!”

“Yes. If—”

“If?”

“You found your cousin’s company too rough for you.”

Bess flashed a look at Richard, and walked on in silence for some moments, with a fine color upon her face. There was no suggestion of patronage in Jeffray’s manner.

“I am not afraid of Dan,” she answered, “though I am grateful to you—for this.”

A sudden realization of the gulf between them had taken hold of the girl’s heart. This Richard Jeffray was one of the gentry, and she, a poor forest wench not fit to stand before women, less handsome and less honest than herself. At Rodenham she would take her meals in the servants’ hall, and sleep in an attic under the roof. It would even be considered a favor if the young squire spoke to her. No. She loved Pevensel and her forest liberty better than that.

“I am not afraid of Dan,” she said again, with a fine lifting of her head.

Jeffray felt something of the pride that played in her, and respected her the more for it.

“I am not dropping a favor for you, Bess,” he said.

“Thank you,” she answered.

“You see—you saved me from Dan’s cudgelling. And you—and Ursula have been very kind to me.”

They looked at each other half questioningly, a long and steady look that bore more meaning than many words. Richard blushed under the girl’s gaze. He suspected the spirit in her, and was loath to think that he had hurt her pride.

“You said I might have your pistols,” quoth Bess, suddenly.

“I will give you them.”

“I was not made to serve. We are wild folk in the forest. I can take care of myself.”

Then, catching the look in Jeffray’s eyes, she smiled at him very dearly, and touched his hand.

“But—I shall remember,” she added.

“And I, Bess, also.”

“I will have the pistols—”

“A strange present!”

“No, no, they will make me feel somehow that you are near. For I dreamed of you on St. Agnes’s Eve.”

She blushed and hung her head as soon as the words were out of her mouth. Jeffray had started, and reddened also. He looked at Bess and then at the heath showing gold beyond the trees.

“I will ride over—sometimes, Bess,” he said, slowly.

Her eyes flashed down at him, and then wavered away towards the woods.

“I knew you,” she said, simply, “when you lay on the grass—after I had put back Dan’s stick.”

“Knew me?”

“Yes.”

Richard said nothing, but there was a strange sense of hurrying at his heart.

They overtook Peter Gladden on the heath, and Richard taking the mare from him bade him go forward and warn the Lady Letitia of his coming. When the man had gone, Jeffray drew the pistols from the holsters, shook out the priming, and handed them to Bess. They were light weapons of delicate make, the butts set in Damascened silver. The girl took them and put them in her gown above her girdle.

“Be careful, Bess,” he said.

She laughed, and her eyes grew very bright of a sudden.

“You did not give me these in the dream,” she said.

In another moment Richard was in the saddle cantering over the heath towards the Beacon Rock.

The Lady Letitia had spent the whole of the previous day in meditation, suspecting shrewdly enough that her nephew had ridden over to Hardacre to make peace with the sweet Jilian. Of course Miss Hardacre would be kind to Richard, and in that arch young lady’s kindness, Aunt Letitia had foreseen her own discomfort. Now the dowager was not in the least inclined to abandon Rodenham, for her financial affairs were still in an embarrassed state. She had shut up her house in town for the winter, and was keeping her coach-horses and her three servants at Jeffray’s expense. Till late in the spring she had intended foraging for herself amid the Sussex woods, and it would be wickedly inconvenient for her to leave Rodenham at present.

Hence the news of Richard’s accident had provided the astute old lady with an admirable opportunity for a reconciliation. She worked herself into quite a delirium of distress over the tidings, questioned Solomon Grimshaw in person, and soon wormed the truth from him as to how Richard had come by a broken head. The romance pleased Aunt Letitia prodigiously. She gave Solomon a guinea, one of poor Sugg’s ewe lambs, and bade him carry back her affectionate greetings to Squire Jeffray. She would have flown to him that very moment, only it was pitch dark, and

the roads in such a state. “Gladden, Peter Gladden, have my coach—my own coach, Gladden—round at the door by nine. I must drive over and bring the poor boy home. God grant, Gladden, that he is not dangerously hurt. You must send one of the men over to Rookhurst to order Surgeon Stott to call at the priory to-morrow.”

Aunt Letitia had dismounted from the coach that morning, and was hobbling up and down under the shadow of the Beacon Rock, while her fat horses steamed in the road. It was indeed an affecting sight to behold this goddess of powder and patches strutting with all the admirable anxiety of a “stage grandmother” on nature’s unartificial grass. The Lady Letitia was an evening, rather than a morning, star, for her physical frailties were unmasked by the sun. When Richard appeared riding over the heath, the dowager’s holy outburst of joy was an impressive sight to Peter Gladden and the lackey behind the coach. The old lady actually toddled forward to meet Richard, a ridiculous little straw hat perched on her powdered head, her ebony stick in one hand, a lace handkerchief in the other.

“My dear Richard—my dear Richard—I am overcome with thankfulness at seeing you so hearty.”

Jeffray, dismounting, kissed the Lady Letitia’s hand. He was touched by his aunt’s display of feeling, and it was not in him to remember a wrong.

“I am not much the worse, aunt,” he said, smiling, “but for a bandaged head.”

“It was such a shock to me last night, Richard,” quoth the lady, dabbing her eyes with her lace handkerchief, “for I said to myself, Richard: ‘perhaps the poor lad is dangerously hurt, and I cannot get to him before the morning.’ And I remembered that we had quarrelled the night before. Oh, my dear nephew, what a solemn thing is life; death is always near to us, and how inscrutable are the ways of the Almighty.”

Richard, much moved by the old lady’s emotion, kissed her hand a second time with much unction.

“I am sure, Aunt Letitia,” he said, simply, “I regret the rude words I spoke to you that night. I lost my temper, madam, and I ask your pardon. Dear Jilian and I were reconciled yesterday. I am sure you were mistaken in her, aunt. She has a noble nature, and bears no malice.”

The Lady Letitia sniffed, suppressed her inclination towards cynicism, and answered her nephew with gracious resignation.

“Let us say no more about it, dear Richard,” she said, “we are all mistaken at times, and not even the oldest among us are infallible. I can forget the past in thankfulness for your safe return; you must try and forgive your old aunt her whims.”

Richard bowed and offered the Lady Letitia his arm.

“God forbid, Richard,” she said, impressively, as they walked back towards the coach, Jeffray’s mare following like a dog at his heels, “God forbid that an old woman should trifle with the happiness of two young hearts. I wish you all joy, my dear nephew. You must try and persuade Miss Hardacre to love me.”

Richard was quite conquered by the old lady's tone of tender resignation. Perhaps Jilian had exaggerated his aunt's asperities in the heat of her youthful self-pity. Richard was a peace-loving being, and he was glad that the quarrel promised to end in sunshine.

"I am sure Miss Hardacre bears no malice," he said.

The Lady Letitia's eyes flashed a curious look into Richard's face. So the girl had chosen the saintly and heroic part. Well, she had wit, and her dear nephew was a delightful and amusing simpleton. Did he really think that women ever forgave such insinuations as she, the Lady Letitia, had flung at Miss Hardacre's head? At all events it would be possible for her to remain another month or two in comfort at Rodenham, and it would be an interesting recreation to study the lad's domestic ideals in the future.

"Miss Hardacre must be a very magnanimous young lady," she said, with inward irony.

"Jilian has a generous heart, madam."

"Ah, Richard, the heart is everything in a woman."

"True, aunt, true."

"And you must tell me all about this romantic adventure of yours in the woods. You are quite the knight-errant, sir."

Richard blushed, and laughed good-humoredly.

"I will tell you about it to-night," he said.

Jeffray excused himself from joining the Lady Letitia in her coach, asserting that he had a headache, and that a brisk ride would clear his brain. He mounted his mare, and followed the coach at a trot as it took the southward road through Pevensel.

How strange and mobile are the moods of youth, April-hued, covered with the gold and purple of sunlight or of shadow! Richard Jeffray was almost wroth with his own heart that day as he rode through the woods and saw the great green downs cleave the distant blue. How was it that Miss Jilian's face seemed less fair to him than it had yesterday? How was it that eyes of passionate blue outstarred those of simpering gray? How was it that a glowing face and a fleece of coal-black hair rose more brilliantly before him than did the cream and rose bloom of Miss Jilian's countenance and her head of shimmering gold? What grievous flaw was there in the clear contour of his soul, that sentiments, fragrant yesterday, should leak forth in a night and melt into the air? Was he not the same Richard Jeffray, and Jilian the same artless and forgiving cousin? What had this forest child's face to do with the romance? Surely it was Black Dan's stick that had knocked the sanity out of Richard's skull that he should be possessed by such fickle and yet haunting thoughts.

A sturdy traveller was resting on the parapet of Rodenham bridge as the Lady Letitia's coach swung over towards the gates of the park. The stranger, whose round red face topped a robust and somewhat corpulent body, was dressed in a suit of

rusty brown. He wore a three-cocked-hat, rough shoes with dirty buckles, and the tail of his wig plaited into a club. What appeared to be a peddler's pack was strapped over his broad shoulders, and on the parapet lay a thick oak stick and a red cloth bundle. The man's keen and humorous eyes had watched the Lady Letitia's coach swing by with a cynical twinkle.

Richard had no sooner set his eyes on the man than he reined in on the bridge, and was out of the saddle with a flush on his boyish face.

"Wilson—Dick Wilson, by all the gods!"

The traveller had started up from the parapet, and had held out a pair of red and sinewy hands to Richard.

"It is Dick Wilson, despite the gods," he said.

"You have honored Rodenham—at last."

"I tramped down from town with my pack on my shoulders."

"To see the youngster whom you nursed through a fever at Rome."

They shook hands with great good-will, a sly smile playing about the painter's rugged face.

"And do you mean to tell me, sir," he laughed, "that you are not ashamed of such a vagabond? Why, I have been twice in peril of the stocks as I came through from town."

"Ashamed, Dick!"

The painter indulged in a ludicrous grimace, turned up his brown coat to show the frayed lining thereof, remarked that he had a hole in his breeches, and at the same time brandished his scarlet bundle.

"If your polite pride can stand this, Richard Jeffray," he said, "then, sir, I will come inside."

Richard laughed, and put his hand on the painter's shoulder.

"Wilson," he said, "I think we have seen enough of the world to know what polite trifles are worth."

"Egad, sir, then we must have outstripped humanity in our philosophies."

There was no doubt as to Richard's sincerity. He and Dick Wilson had spent months together in Italy, and the lad had learned to admire the robust but often cross-grained artist.

"How long can you stay, eh? Why not spend the spring and summer with me? I am alone save for an aunt who goes to Tunbridge before long. We can find you splendor enough in our Sussex woods and downs, even to satisfy your mighty tastes."

Wilson appeared touched by the enthusiastic sincerity of the lad's welcome. His round face beamed, his eyes twinkled.

"I was half in doubt, Jeffray," he confessed, "whether you would be pleased to

see such a scarecrow. I have already tasted something of the world's favor, sweet for a week, sour for ten months. Deuce take me, sir, I am glad of your welcome. It is bravely given, and I thank you for it, Richard Jeffray."

IX

The two Richards walked through the park towards the priory, Jeffray laughingly explaining how he had come by a broken head, and pointing out the many beauties of the place as they went. There were the cedars his father had planted, already lusty and handsome trees. Pine and beech woods spread romantic and mysterious gloom upon the slopes. Here were gnarled and dying oaks that still lived on, torn and shattered, after the storms of centuries. There on a green knoll stood the holy thorn that was said to have sprung from the bones of some old saint, and had flowered in popish days at Christmas. A myriad rushes streaked the grass-land where mole-hills studded the dew-silvered grass with brown. When they came in sight of the old house lying in the hollow, lapped in the purple gloom of the woods, its chimneys towering to the blue, its fish-ponds glimmering in the sun, Wilson stopped and laid a hand on Jeffray's shoulder.

"By Heaven, this is splendid!" he said. "See the purple, the green, the blue, the brave bronze! See the silver showers of light on the old trees! The toning of the moss and lichen on those walls is enough to make an impotent mortal weep!"

Jeffray's face kindled. He loved the old place, and was glad to hear so blunt a critic as Richard Wilson wax eloquent over the home of his fathers.

"You must stay with me, Dick," he said, warmly. "Can you leave your portrait-painting in town?"

"I have given up the flattering of fools," quoth the painter, almost with a snarl; "and in turn the fools are giving me up. See here, Richard, this is how the gay world treats its servant."

He turned up the tails of his shabby coat, and smiled with a species of rueful bitterness.

"English gentlemen like to behold their own smug faces, sir," he added, "better than waving woods and smiling plains."

Before introducing Wilson to the Lady Letitia in the afternoon, Richard delicately assisted the painter in making his toilet, lending him a frilled shirt, and a green waistcoat that was much too tight for him, and providing him with a pair of Peter Gladden's buckled shoes.

"My aunt is something of a great lady, Dick," he said, with an apologetic twinkle; "she loves to see a man's buttons and cravat in order. I am always being scolded for slovenliness and lack of distinction, so to appease her taste I take more trouble with my dress."

The painter, who was worming his huge feet into the butler's shoes, grimaced at Jeffray, and ran the professional eye over the black-coated figure.

“You have not grown fatter, Richard,” he said. “I could still make an Apollo of you in the nude, as I did that day when you bathed at Baiæ. What a graceful trunk, sir!—what a hand and foot! Don’t blush, lad, your lines are splendid, so far as they go, though, on my honor, you are reading too much, to judge by your shoulders. I’ll wager you have set the country nymphs a-simpering, the dear Phœbes. Deuce take these shoes! Is my wig on straight?”

“Perfectly,” said Jeffray, with a smile.

Wilson expanded his chest, turned out his right foot and knee, put his hand over his heart, and bowed.

“How’s that, Richard?” he asked, gravely.

“Worthy of St. James’s.”

“My professional bow, Richard. I detest it, sir—detest it! The money-getting tricks are not part of my art. I leave them to Mr. Joshua, who could flatter the moon into a trance, as his namesake did in Canaan, and talk the sun into believing that his complexion was not fiery. Now, sir, lead on.”

Meanwhile, the Lady Letitia had heard strange and distorted accounts of the person and profession of her nephew’s visitor. Peter Gladden had unpacked Mr. Wilson’s knapsack and red bundle, and had discovered besides canvas, brushes, and paints, a tooth-brush, a few handkerchiefs, a razor, a soiled shirt, two night-caps, a piece of flannel, and a prayer-book. It was all over the house and into Aunt Letitia’s ears in half an hour that this eccentric person had borrowed Mr. Jeffray’s waistcoat and a pair of Peter Gladden’s shoes. The dowager’s pride bristled, despite the saintly emotions of the morning. A common painter fellow, a mere vulgar artist, whose name she did not even know, received as a guest at Rodenham Priory! What could Richard be thinking of, by associating with such a low and uncultured creature! Why, he would be for entertaining next that awful author fellow, Mr. Johnson, a man who spilled soup down his waistcoat, sneezed over the table, and was so bold as to contradict a lady flatly.

Hence, the Lady Letitia’s reception of Mr. Richard Wilson in the parlor that afternoon, was not calculated to put that gentleman at his ease. The dowager was polite, portentously and oppressively polite, “to please poor Richard,” as she would have phrased it. Her eyes searched Mr. Wilson from wig to buckles, started at his wrinkled and complaining waistcoat, and recognized Peter Gladden’s shoes. She deigned to listen to the painter’s stumbling platitudes about the weather, and then discovered suddenly that she was afflicted with deafness and a sick headache, and declared that she would go and rest in her bedroom until dinner.

When the Lady Letitia had sailed out of the room, Wilson stood and stared pathetically at Jeffray.

“There, sir,” he exclaimed, with tragic emphasis, “you see, my poor face always frightens them away, and I fall over my own tongue as well as over my feet. Nature did not breed me for a courtier, Jeffray. Damn it, I can’t flatter the fools in the

gallant style. Beg pardon, Richard, I was not referring to your august and noble relative."

"Come and see the garden, Dick."

"Do you keep peacocks there, sir?"

"Peacocks, Dick! Why, peacocks?"

"A mere whim, sir—a mere whim," quoth the painter, with a queer twist of the mouth.

A mysterious change had fallen upon the Lady Letitia's temper by dinner-time, a change that betrayed itself in her attitude towards Richard Wilson. She was peculiarly gracious and urbane, and no one could be more gracious than the Lady Letitia when she so chose. The painter, astonished at his sudden acceptance into favor, found himself talking to the dowager with an ease and a fervor that made him fancy for the moment that Jeffray's wine had got into his noddle. Aunt Letitia beamed and sparkled, crowed and chuckled at Dick's jokes, and seemed wholly to have abandoned the air of hauteur that had repulsed Wilson in the afternoon. Jeffray himself was thoroughly mystified as to the miracle. He could only conclude that the dear old lady had spoken the truth when she had complained of a headache, and that it was not the painter's shabby clothes or his rough and unfashionable face that had shocked her aristocratic susceptibilities.

Aunt Letitia had been spending the afternoon gossiping with her maid, and that trusted servant had let fall Mr. Richard Wilson's name into her mistress's pensive ear. The four syllables had suddenly struck some rusty note of by-gone scandal in the dowager's brain. "Wilson! Wilson! Yes, to be sure, there used to be a painter fellow in town of that name. She had not heard him spoken of lately, though some of the gentry had sat to him for their portraits years ago. Wait! Could this be the Mr. Richard Wilson concerning whom a merry tale had been spun one season in the fashionable seats? Sir Peter Hardacre had had a house in town seven years or so ago, before economy had been forced like a bolus down the poor baronet's throat." The Lady Letitia had knitted her brows over these curious and interesting reminiscences. She had determined to discover more about Mr. Richard Wilson and his past that evening. Hence her amazing and gracious affability to that honest but slovenly individual, an affability that made Mr. Wilson expand his chest, set his shabby wig straight, and imagine that there was yet hope for him in the world of Mammon.

"You have been long abroad, sir, I believe?" said the dowager, sweetly, after drawing the painter into a discussion on Italian art.

"Years, madam, years."

"You painted many clever portraits in town some seasons ago."

Mr. Wilson bowed in his chair, and was flattered to hear my lady had so kindly a memory.

"I was honored at one time, madam," he said, stroking his broad chin, "by the presence of certain of the beauties of the fashionable world in my studio. Yes,

madam, I painted Sir Toby Gilhooly and his lovely daughters; Mr. Walsh, the poet; Admiral Timberbuck, and many others, madam."

The Lady Letitia twinkled, and exhaled perfumes. Her nephew was engaged at the other end of the table in a scholarly debate on Roman architecture with Dr. Sugg. The lad had desisted from fathering Richard Wilson, and was delighted to see that his aunt showed the poor fellow so much favor.

"Did you ever paint Sir Peter Hardacre, Mr. Wilson?" asked the old lady, innocent as a paschal lamb.

The painter darted a look at her, flushed, and began to fidget in his chair.

"Sir Peter Hardacre, madam?"

"Yes, sir. I thought I remembered seeing the picture—"

Richard Wilson adjusted his wig, and drank down a glass of wine.

"I believe I did, madam—I believe I did," he said.

"Dear Sir Peter; he must have made such an aristocratic study! I think I must really ask you to honor me with a sitting, Mr. Wilson."

The painter blinked, and then bowed low across the table. He appeared glad in measure to escape the subject, nor was his discomfort lost upon the Lady Letitia.

"I shall be proud, madam, proud," he said; "the honor is on my side, madam. I shall be proud to paint Richard Jeffray's grandmother—pardon me, madam—aunt, I mean. Upon my word, madam, you look extraordinarily young to have so old a nephew."

Aunt Letitia, not in the least disturbed by the painter's slip, received his clumsy apologies and awkward apings of flattery with infinite good humor.

"La, Mr. Wilson," she said, frankly, "I am an old woman, and, thank God, I know it. I think it is a pitiful sight, sir, to see an old woman frittering away the solemn and awful years of age in folly, when she should be preparing herself to meet her Maker."

"Upon my soul, madam," said the painter, much relieved, "your wisdom is as admirable as—ahem—as—as your distinguished and aristocratic person. Ahem. I shall be proud, madam, to put my poor powers at your service."

"What a blundering and honest fool it is," thought the Lady Letitia. "Yes, it is the very fellow who painted old Sir Peter, and made love to the daughter. Or was it Miss Jilian who made love to him? Egad, dear nephew, there is no need for your old aunt to play the scandal-monger, if this good ass can be got to bray. Mr. Wilson must be made welcome here, and the secret coaxed out of his ugly mouth." And thus the Lady Letitia continued to beam upon the painter with all the waning sunshine of her November years. She made him draw droll sketches for her in the parlor after dinner, laughed at his whimsies, promised to send her dear friends Lady Boodle and Miss FitzNoodle to be painted by Wilson when he returned to town. When Peter Gladden set the card-table in order, the dowager insisted that Richard

Wilson should be her partner, and that Richard should challenge them with Dr. Sugg. And though poor Dick managed his cards disgracefully, trumped the Lady Letitia's tricks, bungled the returns and lost her money, she continued to beam on him with undiminished brightness, and to encourage the good oaf with all the sweetness she could compel.

"Yes, Richard, mon cher," she said to her nephew, as she bade him good-night, "my headache has left me; I felt quite vaporish this afternoon. Your friend is a dear creature, so droll and refreshing; not polished, of course, but quite charming. I have fallen in love with the dear bear, Richard. It is so delightful to talk to a man of sense and humor, even though he may smell—faintly, of the soil."

Bess had wandered back from Beacon Rock through her well-loved woods that morning, thinking more of Richard Jeffray than was good for a woman's heart. There was a charm about Bess that no mortal could gainsay. She looked fit for carrying a milking-pail over meadows golden with cowslips, for playing the Miss Prue gathering rosemary and thyme in some red-walled garden, or walking in brocade and lace amid the close-clipped yews, statues, and terrace ways of some stately manor. Despite her strength and her brilliant vitality she was no hoyden, and even in her wild beauty seemed to suggest the subtle delicacy of high birth. Richard himself had been puzzled by her quaint stateliness, such stateliness as a child might have inherited from a noble mother and treasured unconsciously as she grew to womanhood.

The thoughts uppermost in Bess's mind that morning dealt with the worldly gulf between Jeffray and herself. The girl had been content hitherto with the forest life, content to accept old Ursula as her foster-mother and the rest of them as her kinsfolk. She had grown up with Dan and David, and the forest children, ignorant as they were of the great world beyond the shadows of Pevensel. Yet beyond the forest life a dim and forgotten past seemed to rise up in the blue distance of the mind. A few strange incidents, which she had never been able to explain, still lived on like relics of a vanished age. She had prattled of them to old Ursula as a child, and had been laughed at and chided for her pains. The old woman had always told her that Rachel, her mother, Ursula's younger sister, had run away from the hamlet before Bess was born, and that when her mother had died—"down in the west"—a peddler man had brought Bess back to the Grimshaws of Pevensel. Ursula had always shed a species of reticent mystery over the past, and had waxed dour if Bess had pressed her questions too boldly or too far.

The girl had been content these years to let these vague memories glide away into oblivion. Now and again they would rise up to haunt her with strange vividness, frail ghostly images of other days. How was it that she often saw a negro man with black, woolly hair in her dreams, she who had never seen such a man in Pevensel? Then there was that memory of her falling and cutting her bare knee upon a stone, and of a tall lady with bright eyes and a brooch with green stones at her throat

running to catch her in her arms. Vaguely, too, she believed that she had once been in a great ship at sea. There were incidents that lived more vividly than the rest in her mind; one, the memory of her standing at night on the deck of a ship with the dark sails flapping above and rough men swearing and quarrelling about her; she had seen blows given, heard a wild cry and the plash of a body thrown over the bulwarks into the sea. Then again she remembered being taken in a boat by night to land; the same rough men were with her; she could still recall one who wore a great pig-tail and had a black patch over one eye and a cloven lip. They had come with her to the shore and taken her into the woods, carrying bales that had seemed wondrous heavy. Thence they had disappeared, and the life in Pevensel had begun, its very beginnings dim as the mysterious past.

These memories came back with strange vividness to her mind that morning after her parting with Jeffray on the heath. For the first time in her life she found herself wondering whether old Ursula had told her the truth. Could she have dreamed these mind pictures that still clung to her? Were these memories but the dim and fantastic fancies of childhood, mere myths begotten of a child's brain. She puzzled over them earnestly as she walked through the woods that morning, and promised herself that she would tell them to Richard Jeffray when they should meet again.

Old Ursula sat up after Bess had gone to bed that night, huddled snugly in the ingle-nook with her black cat at her side. The pewter glistened on the shelves as the handful of sticks that the dame had thrown on the sulky fire kindled and broke into busy flame. Bess had been in bed half an hour or more, and was lying with her black hair loose upon the pillow, thinking of Richard Jeffray and her adventure with him. She had primed the pistols from the powder-horn kept in the kitchen-press, and had hidden them away in the cupboard in her bedroom, meaning to carry one whenever she went abroad in the woods. Bess had fallen asleep, when old Ursula, dozing in the ingle-nook, was awakened by a knocking at the cottage door. She started up, hobbled across the kitchen, and let Isaac Grimshaw in.

The old man sat himself down on the settle before the fire, drew out a short pipe and a tobacco-box, and began to smoke. He looked at Ursula with his shrewd, calculating eyes, jerked his thumb over his shoulder, and smiled.

"The wench is above, eh?"

"This hour or more."

"Dame, I have much to gossip over with ye about our Bess. She is a dangerous wench and needs a master. There'll be no peace with us, dame, till the girl is stalled."

Isaac, kindling to his subject, began to talk to the old woman, significantly, about betrothing the girl to Dan without delay. He had much to put forward in justification of the measure. Bess's beauty had become an apple of discord in the hamlet; all the young men wanted her, and Black Dan would put up with no rival. Isaac spoke mysteriously of the need for good-fellowship among the forest-folk;

there must be no mating of Bess to a bachelor outside the hamlet; she was one of them and with them she must remain. Old Ursula looked surly and displeased during the patriarch's harangue. The match was little to her liking, and she distrusted Dan's ability to make marriage bearable to such a woman as Bess.

"I may as well tell ye, Isaac," she said, sourly, "that the wench does not care a brass button for your Dan."

"Who does she fancy then, dame, eh?"

"I thought once she was for liking young David. She is a powerful-tempered wench is Bess, and she don't like being driven."

Isaac puffed at his pipe and frowned.

"Odd's my life," he said, "the wench must be taught her place. My Dan's the first man in the forest, eh? What better lad does the wench look for? I'll wager that we will soon persuade her."

"You be careful of Bess," quoth the old woman, solemnly.

"Careful, dame! That's the very text I'm preaching on. How much does the wench remember, eh? Deuce take me, sister, we have reared her here, and here she must remain. And Dan will be breaking all the youths' heads unless he has her, and have her he shall."

Isaac laid down his pipe and, leaning forward with his hands spread to the fire, began to speak further to the old woman in his grim and didactic way. There was an expression of almost ferocious earnestness on his thin and clever face, and it was difficult to believe that an old man could be possessed of so much fire and vigor. Isaac had ruled the hamlet these forty years; his will had been law unto them all. Old Ursula's one feeling was known to the patriarch well enough. He played upon it that night as she sat in the ingle-nook and listened. The dame kept a stockingful of guineas hid under the floor in one of the upper rooms. She would often go up secretly and play with the pretty golden pieces, counting and recounting them, letting them fall and jingle in her lap.

"A hundred gold guineas, dame," said Isaac at the end of his persuading. "I'll bring them to you on the betrothal day. Why, look you, the wench will be spry and gay enough when she is mated. Unbroken fillies are always wild."

Ursula nodded over the fire, stroked the black cat reflectively, and watched Isaac's face with her greedy eyes.

"You take your oath on it?" she asked.

The patriarch grinned, and drew a leather pouch from the tail-pocket of his coat. He jingled it and tossed it into his sister's lap.

"There are twenty," he said, curtly; "keep them, dame, as a proof of the bargain. I'll give you the rest when the gold piece is broken."

X

Richard Jeffray could not break from the thoughts of Bess that had followed him from out the green glooms of Pevensel. Why, because she had a comely body and a comely face, should he be forever recalling the flash of her red-stockinged ankles under her short gown of green, the fine lifting of her handsome head, the way she had of putting her right hand up to her throat and of letting her eyes dwell with strange intentness upon his face? Jeffray was honestly troubled by these haunting thoughts, these visions of passion that flashed on him out of his own heart. Despite his romanticism he did not lack for character and discretion, and pedagogic reason told him that such dreams were neither obedient to philosophy nor to his loyalty to Miss Hardacre.

The news of Jeffray's misadventure in the woods had been duly carried to Hardacre house; nor was it long before Mr. Lancelot and Miss Jilian rode over to inquire after their dear cousin. Richard was idling in the garden, planning color schemes for the summer, when he heard the clatter of hoofs coming down the road through the park. Richard recognized Mr. Lot in scarlet mounted on a great, rawboned roan, and Miss Jilian beside him in a green riding-habit, a black beaver on her auburn hair. Richard crossed the terrace and went down the steps to meet them. His head was still bandaged, a fact that Mr. Lancelot remarked upon with his usual blunt brevity.

"Egad, cousin," he said, with a laugh, "so the forester broke your pate for you, deuce take his insolence! Ha, Jill, how do you like our Richard in bandages? You should wear a mob-cap, cousin. How's the dowager? Got over the mumps yet?"

Mr. Lot roared over his own facetiousness, while Richard stood beside Miss Jilian's gray mare and pressed the young lady's hand.

"I should have been at Hardacre before this," he said, blushing, "but Surgeon Stott ordered me to bide quiet."

There was a look of delicious anxiety in Miss Hardacre's eyes.

"Are you sure you ought to be up and about, Richard?" she asked.

"There is nothing much amiss with me," he answered, looking up at her shyly. "Won't you dismount and come into the house? I will call Gladden and have your horses taken."

Mr. Lot winked and inclined his head knowingly in the direction of the house.

"Has she got her war-paint on, Richard?"

"Who?"

"Your revered relative. I am ready to make peace though she did send me down to supper with the ugliest girl this side of Lewes. It's uncommon hot to-day. What

do you say, Jill? Shall we tumble in and have a glass of wine and a chat with the old lady?"

Miss Hardacre simpered, blushed prettily, and glanced at Richard. The lad read her inclination on the instant, and helped her to dismount. She pressed his hand kindly, her gray eyes holding his a moment with a look that did not lack for eloquence.

"Hold there; what a deuced ass I am," quoth Mr. Lot, who had rolled out of the saddle and was thumping his manly chest. "Here's a certain precious document buttoned up in my breast-pocket. We are giving a masked ball next week at Hardacre. Quite a gorgeous affair, and Sir Peter thought he'd send the dowager a state summons, just to show there is no ill-feeling. Of course you'll come, cousin."

Mr. Lot drew a sealed letter from his pocket, and handed it to Richard with a mock bow.

"Let old Gladden give it to her in state," he said, with a wink; "it will make a better show on a silver salver."

Richard was looking at Miss Jilian's pink face and at her pretty figure sheathed in green.

"It is very magnanimous of Sir Peter," he said, warmly, "to let by-gones be by-gones. I am sure Aunt Letitia is sorry for what happened that evening. She asked me, Jilian, to try and persuade you to forgive her."

Lancelot Hardacre chuckled.

"Dear old Mohawk," he said.

"Of course I will forgive her," quoth Miss Hardacre, sweetly.

"That's the game, Jill. These women, Richard, are moral prodigies. Deuce take me, Jill, you have the temper of an angel. Don't I know it."

Miss Hardacre's gray eyes flashed a curious look at her brother.

"Heavens, Lot," she said, "how you do chatter."

Jeffray had rung the stable-bell, and Peter Gladden and a groom came out to take the horses. Richard ordered the butler to bring cake and wine into the dining-room, and to send the Lady Letitia's maid to inform her mistress, who was taking her afternoon nap, that Miss Hardacre was in the house. They went into the porch together and through the hall into the wainscoted dining-room, Miss Jilian holding her riding-skirt daintily in either hand, Mr. Lot swinging his velvet cap and whip and grinning affectionately at Richard.

The Lady Letitia appeared in due course, as gracious as could be, decked out in a handsome sack, her hair freshly powdered, her mittens on, and her fan swinging at her wrist. She kissed Miss Hardacre on either cheek, squeezed the young lady's hand, beamed at her nephew, and was very affable to Mr. Lancelot. She had received the invitation to Sir Peter's ball from Mr. Gladden's salver, and expressed herself charmed at Sir Peter's courtesy. After wine had been drunk and cake

crumbled, Richard proposed that they should walk out into the garden. The dowager rang for her black mantilla, requested Mr. Lancelot to honor her with his arm, and led the way through the opening upon the terrace. Jilian and Richard lingered behind the Lady Letitia, Miss Hardacre very coy and ready to blush, Richard feeling with some shame that pretty speeches came less glibly from his tongue than they had done of yore.

The sky was a rare blue above the green lawns, the old red walls, and the silvery grass-land of the park. As they walked the box-edged paths betwixt the stately yews and hollies Miss Jilian began to rally Richard on his adventure in the woods. “How gallant and romantic it was, to be sure! Do you think, Richard, that you would have rescued me from some wicked ruffian had your poor cousin been at his mercy?”

Jeffray was convincing in his chivalrous protestations.

“Why, Jilian, can you doubt it?”

“And you would have fought for me, Richard?” queried the young lady, with charming wonder.

“Fight for you, Jilian? Why I would defend you with my life.”

“La, Richard,” she exclaimed, blushing, “how brave you are! Tell me, was the girl pretty?”

“Pretty, Jilian?”

“Now, Richard, I am sure she was pretty.”

“Perhaps she was,” said Richard, with studied carelessness. “Were she ugly or otherwise, I only did my duty as a gentleman and a man.”

“You dear lad,” quoth Miss Hardacre, tenderly.

“Jilian!”

“Now don’t pretend you don’t know how brave and noble you are. Ah, Heavens, only to think of it; the wretch might have killed you! It makes me shudder, Richard; it does indeed.”

Jeffray, much touched, looked at the young lady with affectionate and chivalrous candor.

“And should you have cared, dear cousin?” he asked her.

Miss Hardacre flushed crimson and hung her head. How pretty her downcast lashes looked as they swept her fair cheeks; what a sweet, sad smile hovered about her lips.

“Oh, Richard,” she said, “can you not believe—?”

“I believe all that is good and pure and kind of you, dear cousin.”

“There, sir, there; you are making me blush so that I shall hardly be able to face your aunt. You must not flatter a simple girl so. Ah, Richard,”—and she sighed —“thank Heaven that you are safe and well.”

How could Mr. Jeffray bear himself under such delicate flattery but declare Miss

Hardacre to be the kindest and best of women, and to abuse his own foolish heart for dreaming dreams about young ladies with red petticoats and coal-black hair? What a weak creature he was, and what a noble being this cousin of his appeared! He was very tender and attentive to Miss Jilian that day, nor did the lady fail to encourage such an admirable display of affection. She flashed shy and melting glances into Mr. Richard's face, blushed dearly when he spoke to her, and was as gentle and as sweet as any convent saint. Jeffray strove to forget poor Bess of the Woods, whose fierce blue eyes blazed out at him continually.

Meanwhile, Aunt Letitia appeared determined to erase from the minds of the Hardacres the unpleasant memories that her own strategies had created. Her amiability puzzled Mr. Lancelot that afternoon as he walked the terrace with her, and looked down upon the lawns and prim paths beneath, the statuary shining white amid the yews and cedars. The old lady's eyes dwelt often on Richard and Miss Jilian who were drifting to and fro absorbed in their mutual confidences. From time to time she would scan the park as though watching for some person to appear. Dick Wilson had gone forth sketching to study the effects of light and shade upon the distant summits of the "downs." The Lady Letitia was eagerly expecting the painter's return. It would be so interesting to watch his introduction to Miss Hardacre.

"Look at those dear innocents," she said, with a twinkle, to Mr. Lot. "To be frank with you, sir, I was not eager to see my nephew married; early marriages are such lotteries, Mr. Hardacre. But now that I am beginning to see more of your sweet sister, I must confess that I am becoming converted."

Lot Hardacre gave the old lady a queer look. He was no fool was Mr. Lot, and he did not trust the dowager with all the manly innocence of his fox-hunting heart.

"I observe, madam," he said, bluntly, "that you are a sportswoman. You don't mind confessing when you're off the scent."

"The truth, sir, is always easily understood," quoth the dowager, cheerfully.

"Egad, you're right, madam."

"And I shall have much pleasure in attending your father's 'rout,' Mr. Hardacre. Sir Peter has shown a magnanimous spirit; and I trust that a woman of my birth knows how to receive so graceful a pardon."

Mr. Lot grinned. He recalled to mind how his sister had been compelled to weep and threaten hysterics before the baronet could be prevailed upon to include the Rodenham folk among his guests. "Richard was a decent lad, to be sure, but that damned old cat, no, egad, he'd see her hanged before he had her at Hardacre." It was only after much persuasion that Sir Peter had been brought to see that it would be wiser to appease the old lady than to tempt her malice.

"I trust that we have buried the hatchet, madam," said Mr. Lot, with a bow.

"The hatchet, sir!"

"You and Sir Peter, madam, had better leave whist alone."

The old lady chuckled as though Mr. Hardacre had delivered himself of an excellent jest. She wagged her head at him, and gave him an arch smile that carried no malice.

"You are a wicked fellow, sir," she said, with a pat of the hand. "I can see that you have been laughing all the time at your father and myself. La, Mr. Hardacre, I can take a joke, to be sure. You are a wicked, sly fellow, sir, and you are no fool, I see that clearly enough."

Much to Aunt Letitia's chagrin, Dick Wilson did not return in time that day to be introduced to Miss Jilian Hardacre. She confessed to the young lady that her nephew had a painter friend staying at the priory, a droll and charming creature, but the Lady Letitia did not divulge the gentleman's name. Might they bring him to the masked ball at Hardacre? Of course Miss Jilian declared that any friend of her cousin's would be welcome. And thus Mr. Lot and his sister departed from Rodenham, on the best of terms with Richard Jeffray, and apparently reconciled to the Lady Letitia, his aunt. Richard walked with them across the park, and took leave of his sweet cousin with an ardent look and a significant pressure of the hand.

As they climbed the road up the long hill towards Pevensel, Miss Jilian looked at her brother with a questioning smile, and remarked on the Lady Letitia's change of temper.

"Richard must have terrified the poor old woman," she said. "I should never have thought that the lad had so much spirit in him."

Mr. Lot thrust out his lower lip and swore.

"Devil take the old cat," he said; "she is too deuced polite and purry to make me fancy her. Do you think she loves us, Jill? Damme, I'll wager she'd like to slap your face."

"And yours too, Lot, eh?"

They laughed and whipped up their horses to a trot as they topped the hill.

"Cousin Richard's a little gentleman," quoth Mr. Hardacre, "though he is a bit of a fool."

"No, no, Lot, he is too honest, that is all. I like the lad. He has a sweet nature."

"What I should like to know is," returned the brother, "what sort of mischief that old catamaran is plotting. She's a regular Jezebel, Jill. Deuce take it, she would cheat Old Nick into believing her an angel, but she won't cheat me."

Meanwhile poor Bess, in Pevensel, had already been confronted with Isaac Grimshaw's authority. She had told old Ursula of the pistols Jeffray had given her, and while the girl was away milking just before sunset, the old lady had crept up the stairs, filched away the pistols from the cupboard, and hidden them in the hole under the floor where she kept her guineas. The same evening, as Bess was sitting on the settle before the fire, thinking of Jeffray, her work lying idle in her lap, there came a sudden knocking at the cottage door. Old Ursula jumped up, shot back the bolt, and let in Isaac and his son. She locked the door after them and pocketed the key. Bess,

starting up from the settle, became aware instinctively that there was some conspiracy afoot against herself.

Isaac, glib and smiling, thrust Dan forward—Dan, upon whose hairy face there was a suggestive and sheepish grin.

"I be come to claim you, Bess," he said, shifting his fur cap from hand to hand.

"Claim me!"

"Mr. Isaac has ordered it. You and me are to break a coin together. Come, lass, I'll be kind and easy with you. Give me a kiss, and let's call it a bargain."

Bess, flashing fierce scorn out of her eyes at Dan, turned on Isaac with rebellious and glowing face.

"I'll not wed Dan," she said. "No, I'll have none of him. Press me if you dare."

Grimshaw smiled at her, rubbed his hands together, and nudged Dan with his elbow. The giant made a step towards Bess, grinning through his beard. In an instant the girl had turned and darted towards the stairs, only to find the door closed and old Ursula leaning against it. Trapped, Bess drew herself up and looked at the old woman with wistful anger.

"Are you against me, too, mother?"

Ursula smiled painfully.

"Isaac's word is law, girl," she said.

"I'll not marry Dan, no—I hate him. I'll not be married against my will."

She turned and faced old Grimshaw and his son, her eyes fierce as the eyes of some wild thing caught in a snare.

"Dan," she cried, "will you marry me? Ha, I hate you; I hate your great, ugly face. Will you marry me, I say? You oaf, you great, black, hairy fool, I hate you. Be careful, all of you. I am not to be bought and sold."

The three were silent a moment while Bess stood in the centre of the room, passionately defiant, her fists clinched, her strong chin up. Old Isaac watched her, and still rubbed his hands together. Dan, looking sullen and foolish, fidgeted with his cap, and glanced first at Bess and then at his father. Old Ursula had the corner of her apron between her teeth. She was wavering betwixt greed and love for Bess, her foster-child.

Isaac gave his son a sudden, fierce glance and a whispered command. Dan edged across the room towards Bess. In a flash she had picked up a heavy stool, and stood at bay behind the table.

"Come at me, Dan," she cried, "and I'll kill ye."

There was a sudden squeak from old Ursula. She had flung open the door that closed the stairs, the love in her overmastering the greed for gold.

"Bess," she squealed, "quick, lass, the door's open. Dan, you great coward, back, keep your hands off her. I'll have no bullying in my cottage."

Bess had flung the stool at Dan, turned and darted towards Ursula. She kissed the beldam, and fled up the stairs, while the old woman closed the door on her and covered it with her body.

“Brother Isaac,” she said, with a certain dignity that became her gray hairs well, “I’ll have no bullying in my cottage. Let Dan win the girl like a man, and not like a coward. You shall not have Bess to-night save over my body.”

Dan slunk back behind his father, who was looking at his sister with a peculiar smile. He rubbed his hands together, his white hair falling benignantly about his face.

“There, there, dame,” he said, mildly, “don’t put yourself out about the wench. We mean no harm by her, and she shall not be browbeaten. Come, son, you must wait and try what patience will do. Good-night, old lady. Bess can go to sleep in peace.”

XI

Dick Wilson had taken very kindly to Jeffray's hospitality, having discovered a warmth and sincerity in the master of Rodenham that was welcome to this rough philosopher who had suffered from the treachery of fashion. He loved the lad for his enthusiasm, his modesty, and the frank chivalry of his boyish heart. Though contrasting in the outer man there was much similarity of soul between Jeffray and the painter. To strangers Wilson often appeared a coarse, ungainly, and ill-bred person, too much enamoured of using a somewhat scathing tongue on occasions, a man who drank porter and delighted in cheese.

Wilson had already set to work to paint a portrait of the Lady Letitia. The dowager appeared to have become even more enamoured of honest Dick, confessing to Richard that she had but rarely met a man possessed of so much wit, wisdom, and sterling common-sense. Jeffray respected his aunt for admiring Wilson, and was heartily glad that the poor fellow should make a friend of one whom he believed to be of influence in fashionable circles. Wilson had described to Jeffray the many ignominies and trials of a painter's life. Since he had been persuaded by Zucarelli to abandon portraiture for landscape-painting he had discovered that he was dropping from the notice of the polished patrons of the age. Nature smiled upon his canvases, but she could not give him guineas in return. The English gentleman of that period believed that he could see trees, clouds, and rivers anywhere, and was by no means inclined to waste good gold on studies of prosaic hills. Well might Gay's *Trivia* stand for the tastes of the age, Pope-ridden pedantry, cramped, stilted, and precise. An absurd and pompous classicalism clogged the mind. Affectation was everywhere; the very flowers might have been made of wax, the trees of painted pasteboard. As for the imagination, poor bloodless captive, it was crushed beneath epigrammatical pedantry, and walled in by a versification cold as it was ugly.

The Lady Letitia had instructed her nephew to persuade Wilson to go with them to the masked ball at Hardacre, and though Jeffray acknowledged the wisdom of her remarks, he found Mr. Dick by no means eager to enjoy Sir Peter's hospitality.

"Deuce take me, Jeffray," he said, with a grimace, "what sort of figure should I cut at such a rout? I should tread on the wenches' gowns, put my feet through their petticoats, and crunch their pretty toes. How can an elephant mate with Miss Terpsichore? Imagine Richard Wilson plodding through a minuet, sir! As for my talking sweet nothings to the ladies, you might as well put up a rhinoceros to flirt with the Venus of Milo."

Jeffray laughed, but was not answered.

"I think you would enjoy it, Dick," he said. "You can keep to the wall and gossip with the dowagers. I am not much of a dancer myself, but I like to study the

world in one of its many phases."

"I will think about it, lad—I will think about it," said the painter, sadly.

"My aunt will be disappointed, sir, if you do not go."

"Disappointed, eh?"

"Certainly, Dick; she has taken a great fancy to you."

"We are to wear masks, eh?"

"You are not ashamed of your own face, Dick?"

"It is ugly enough, to be sure, sir. A piece of black velvet or crape would look much prettier."

The same evening, while Jeffray was sorting some of his curios in the library, the Lady Letitia catechised Richard Wilson in the parlor on the subject of the Hardacre ball. She was instructing her dear painter in the mysteries of piquet, listening the while to his droll tales with a delight that would have filled Dr. Sugg with scholarly contempt. Wilson, palpably disconcerted, but not desiring to pique the old lady, had put forward much the same excuses as he had made to Mr. Richard. The Lady Letitia, however, refused to listen to his self-depreciation. She even pretended to be incensed with poor Wilson for holding so humble an opinion of his own powers to please.

"Why, sir," she exclaimed, "you are far too modest a creature to succeed in this world. People are only too ready to take one at one's own estimate, if it happens to be a humble one. Remember, sir, that you must expect no magnanimity from your fellow-men; genius is always jeered at by the crawling cleverness of the world. Therefore, stand up for yourself, sir, and let men know that you are better than they."

Poor Wilson fidgeted in his chair, and almost regretted that the dowager had conceived so good an opinion of him.

"And do you think, madam," he asked, bluntly, "that they want a poor beggar of a painter at Hardacre House?"

The Lady Letitia rustled haughtily in her chair.

"I should like to know, sir," she said, "what house is not honored by the presence of genius."

"You are very kind, madam, I am sure."

"Why, I mentioned your name to Miss Hardacre herself."

Dick Wilson looked aghast.

"You mentioned my name and profession, madam?"

"Well, sir, what fault has your superlative modesty to find with me now? Miss Hardacre expressed herself charmed, sir, that you should be present at the ball."

"Charmed!"

"La, dear Mr. Wilson, of course I know all about that boyish escapade of yours,

but those things are of no account in society. If we modish women were to avoid the men we had once flirted with, why, sir, we could go nowhere. I warrant you Miss Hardacre is a discreet young woman; she has forgotten that little affair years ago. Should she frown on you because of it? The best policy in these things, Mr. Wilson, is to act as if there had never been any harmless little romance at all."

The painter had sat blushing like a boy during this harangue. He fidgeted in his chair, looked at the card-table and at the ceiling.

"I suppose this is the fashion, madam, in the genteel world?" he asked.

"Of course, sir, of course, and a very sensible fashion to be sure."

"Then you think there is no reason why I should not present myself at Hardacre House?"

"Mr. Wilson, have I had any experience of the world?"

"Ample, madam, ample."

"And there should be one very good reason, sir," she said, coquettishly, "why you should humor me in the matter."

Wilson stared.

"I like to be amused, sir, by the wit and wisdom of a man of the world. These Sussex folk are terribly dull. I shall die of ennui there, unless—"

"Unless, madam?"

"You take pity on an old woman, and put your most delightful tongue at her service."

Thus, thanks to the Lady Letitia's diplomacy, Richard Jeffray was compelled to ransack his dead father's wardrobe in order to provide his friend with fitting clothes for the occasion. He discovered a sky-blue silk coat that fitted Wilson very respectably. He also provided the painter with a bag-wig, a pair of black silk breeches, white stockings, a richly frilled shirt, a lace cravat, and an old court-sword. The painter made by no means a poor figure as he stood before the fire in Rodenham hall, waiting for the Lady Letitia to descend to the coach. Certainly the muscularity of his calves was too much in evidence; his back resembled a barn door, and his fiery face seemed in need of powder. Richard Wilson looked a gentleman of solidity and distinction, so long as he kept his feet still and did not get into difficulties with his sword. His dignity in such finery was intended to be of the statuesque order. Set him in motion, and his lumbering limbs moved with the clumsy stiltedness of a mechanical figure.

Hardacre House was brilliantly lit that night. The wax-candles in the rooms and galleries would have stocked a country shop a whole year. The major-domo and the serving-men were wearing new liveries of blue plush. The great baronial hall had been cleared for the rout, the floor waxed and polished till it shone, the suits of armor burnished to the radiance of silver, the escutcheons over the great stone fireplace repainted. In the minstrels' gallery above the oak screen were two violins,

a bassoon, a ’cello, and a flute. Sir Peter had hired his musicians at The Wells, so that his guests should not complain of the quality of the music. The hall was gay with bright coats and handsome gowns, when the Rodenham company, properly and discreetly masked, were ushered in unannounced by the major-domo.

And what a quaint and stately sight it was, the great hall with its mediæval atmosphere filled with color, perfume and charming affectation. There were pompous and powdered dames, tinted like delicate china and exhaling odors of ambergris and of musk. There were gentlemen in gorgeous coats and waistcoats, slim swords dangling beside their silk-stockinged legs. And the sweet wenches in brocades and flowered silks, with black masks over their soft, pink faces, and their dear eyes glistening like stars through a dark firmament! The nodding feathers, the lace, the powder and patches, the rippling color, the perfumes, the coy satin slippers, the flickering fans. Surely it was all very quaint and beautiful, even though much of its charm was on the surface, and that there were sharp tongues behind many a set of pearly teeth.

Richard, despite the mystery of a black velvet vizard, soon discovered Mistress Jilian amid the rout. Did he not recognize the plump, pink bosom and the well-turned arms, the dimpled chin and bright gray eyes? Miss Hardacre’s head of auburn hair beaconed to Jeffray despite its powder. How red her mouth was!—and her gay-gowned body exuded perfume as though a spice-box had been broken in her tiring-room. Had he not seen that painted fan before, those twinkling feet, those plump, white hands?

“Ah, Jilian, how well you look to-night.”

The masked maiden laughed mischievously, and tapped Richard’s shoulder with her fan.

“Are you sure it is Jilian?” she asked, with an arch bending of the neck.

“I should know you anywhere.”

“Now, sir, be careful.”

“Why, there is the little brown mole on your left arm.”

“Oh, cousin,” quoth the lady, covering the offending stigma with her fan, “you must not look at me as close as that.”

“How can I help looking at you, Jilian?”

“La, Richard, you are growing sweetly wicked. Come, they are striking up in the gallery. Let us lead off the first dance together.”

The hours went gayly that evening, as though Time tripped to some quaint old measure. What rustling of silk there was, what stately mingling of youth and age! How the colors played under the timbered roof, betwixt the dark oaken walls, under the antlered heads and Gothic armor! How plaintive were the violins and how ravishing the mellow piping of the flute! Every one seemed born for laughter and coquetting. Sir Peter himself led out the Lady Letitia to a minuet, the dowager sailing through it with a stateliness that might have stood for history. Mr. Lot had

discovered Miss Julia Perkaby, and his red face glistened under the magic of those languishing dark eyes. As for Richard Jeffray, he looked distinguished enough to have played the Young Pretender, and his courtesies to Miss Jilian had tottered on the brink of a declaration. Dick Wilson watched the rout from a dark corner under the minstrels' gallery. Perhaps he would have preferred to have studied Greek nymphs dancing in Arcady under the moon, their white limbs flashing under the green umbrage of classic trees.

The painter remained in the background during the evening, and beyond gravitating more than once to the supper-room, hugged his isolation in the corner under the minstrels' gallery. The Lady Letitia was with him ever and again, but Jeffray appeared too busy with Miss Hardacre and his friends to have much time to give to ungainly Dick. Wilson had remained unpresented as yet to Sir Peter and his children. The painter was well content with his obscurity, and beyond indulging in an occasional mild chat with some old lady who had been relegated to the wall, Wilson amused himself with listening to the music, and meditating on the picturesque hypocrisies of life.

All went well till late in the evening, when many of the dancers consented to unmask to each other, and to laugh over the small mysteries black velvet vizards could beget. It was then that the Lady Letitia came sailing down upon Richard Wilson where he sat in his blue coat under the gallery. The old lady had taken good care to keep her eyes on the painter during the whole evening.

"Ha, Mr. Wilson," she said, with a triumphant amiability on her face, "at last I am able to enjoy your company. I have been tired to death, sir, by innumerable squirelings and country Tabithas. Come, has my nephew presented you to Miss Hardacre and Sir Peter?"

Wilson smiled and shook his head.

"Jeffray has been busy with the ladies, madam," he said.

"What an absent lad it is! You must forgive him his youth, sir, and the sentimental excitements thereof. I will present you myself, sir, to Miss Hardacre. I hear she has been asking for you. Come. I see her yonder in the oriel."

"Really, madam," said the painter, bluntly, "I dare say Miss Hardacre can dispense with my society."

The Lady Letitia plied her fan.

"Nonsense," she said, "Miss Hardacre will feel slighted if Richard's friend is left out in the cold. Take your mask off, sir."

"Is it necessary, madam?"

"Heavens, Mr. Wilson, you cannot be presented to the lady of the house in blinkers! Ah, that is well. Put it in your pocket, sir. And now give me your arm."

Miss Jilian was sitting on one of the benches in the great oriel that bayed out from the right of the raised dais. The perpendicular window itself was filled with white glass, banded across the centre with the arms of the Hardacres, gules, a

clarion argent, and the shields of certain families with whom they had been connected by marriage. Miss Hardacre, who had unmasked, was talking to one of Squire Pierpoint's daughters when the Lady Letitia came strutting across the hall on Mr. Richard Wilson's arm. The painter looked red and overheated, nor was his composure under the eyes of the assemblage bettered by his nearly tripping over his sword. Jilian had not noticed the dowager's approach, so absorbed was she in confiding to Miss Dorothy Pierpoint some very feminine secrets concerning Richard Jeffray. There was a smile of beautiful amiability on the Lady Letitia's face as she bore down like destiny upon the unconscious maiden.

"My dear Miss Hardacre—"

Jilian's gray eyes flashed up to find the old lady standing before her with a fat man in a blue coat at her side.

"Permit me, my dear, to present to you my nephew's friend, Mr. Richard Wilson, the distinguished portrait-painter."

Poor Dick proceeded to make his most professional and graceful bow. Miss Hardacre, who had gone very white under her delicate rouging, sat staring at the painter's face as though it were possessed of the grim magic of the Medusa's.

"Richard Wilson!"

Miss Hardacre stammered out the words, striving with all her might and main to smile.

"Surely you remember me, madam?" quoth Mr. Dick, clumsily, looking about as great a fool as a man could look in such a predicament.

The Lady Letitia was beaming upon the pair with a mischievous twinkle in her wicked old eyes. She knew that her nephew was watching them from the other side of the hall. But even the dowager was not prepared for the distressing and regrettable scene that was to follow. Miss Hardacre, instead of giving her hand to the painter, shrank back with a shrill scream, and proceeded to faint in the proper pathetic fashion, lying limp and pale in Miss Dorothy Pierpoint's arms. Poor Wilson stood like an emblem of confusion, nodding his heavy head, and staring first at the unconscious Jilian and then at the Lady Letitia. There was much stir and bustle at the upper end of the hall. Old ladies began to crowd in sympathetic curiosity towards the oriel, with bobbing feathers and inquisitive noses.

"Poor dear Miss Hardacre has fainted."

"Dear, dear, the room is uncommonly hot to be sure."

"Will some one give her my smelling-salts?"

"Dear me, sir"—this from a thin dame to Mr. Wilson, who was pushing through the press—"do you know that you are trampling on my gown?"

The painter had been edging out of the oriel, conceiving that he could best mend the mischief he had done by taking his departure. There must have been some blundering somewhere; either the Lady Letitia had been mistaken in her knowledge

of the world, or he had been mistaken in the Lady Letitia. Looking very red and foolish, he was shambling towards the door when footsteps came rattling after him and a hand gripped the collar of the painter's coat.

Wilson, twisting round, saw Mr. Lot Hardacre's furious red face staring into his.

"Richard Wilson, by Heaven!"

"Leave go of my collar, sir."

"Deuce take me!"

"I came as Richard Jeffray's friend, sir."

"Curse you, sir, how dared you show your blackguardly face before my sister!"

Wilson shook himself free from Lot's hold. He was no angel in the matter of temper, and his patience was giving way under the strain.

"Don't swear at me, sir," he said. "If I have been made a fool of I am not going to be kicked for it."

Mr. Lot fired out a number of oaths, and struck Wilson across the face with the back of his open hand.

"Go, curse you," he roared, "or I will have you pitched out by the grooms."

Several of Mr. Lot's bullies had crowded round, ready to uphold their Achilles in the broil. Dick Wilson, with his red face ablaze and his fists clinched, had fallen back against the wall, and was glaring at Lot Hardacre as though tempted to blood his nose for him then and there. The whole hall was in commotion, many of the guests having turned from the fainting Jilian to watch the quarrel between Mr. Lot and the man in the blue coat. The musicians had stopped playing, and were leaning over the balustrading of the gallery. Sir Peter himself was waddling from the supper-room when Jeffray pushed through the ring of gentlemen about Dick Wilson, and confronted his cousin with flushed face and angry eyes.

"You have struck my guest, Lot," he said, with his hand on his sword.

Mr. Hardacre swore like a coal-heaver.

"Damnation, cousin, you have insulted us by bringing the fellow here."

"Insulted you, sir?"

"And my sister, sir. Deuce take me, Richard Jeffray, if you weren't my cousin I'd have you and this fellow ducked in the horse-trough. Deuce take me, I would."

There was an enthusiastic murmur of approval from Mr. Lancelot's friends. Jeffray, utterly mystified, yet thoroughly angered none the less, looked as though ready to take his cousin at his word. Wilson, who had recovered some of his equanimity, stepped forward suddenly and laid his great hand on the lad's shoulder.

"Richard Jeffray," he said, with a fierce glance at Lot, "let there be no blood-spilling on my account. It is my fault, sir, and this gentleman, your cousin, is justified in construing my presence here into an insult."

Mr. Lot laughed contemptuously.

“Lick the dirt, my bully,” he said, “but I must have a word with Cousin Richard.”

Wilson interposed between the two, keeping his eyes fixed fiercely on Mr. Hardacre’s face.

“Your kinsman is as innocent as a child, sir,” he said; “the blame is mine. I offer you my apologies for causing such a scene. You can find me at Rodenham if you think fit.”

Wilson, looking quite the fine gentleman for once, bowed to Mr. Lancelot, and, elbowing the grinning toadies aside, strode towards the door with his shoulders squared. Richard, still hopelessly befogged, stared at his cousin, and then followed the painter. The Lady Letitia was sailing down the room, the light of battle in her eyes. She called her nephew to her and commanded him to give her his arm.

“It is time that we followed Mr. Wilson,” she said, with a fierce glare at Mr. Lot. “I have no wish to stay longer in this house to be insulted.”

Lot followed the dowager and Richard towards the door.

“You’ll hear from me, cousin,” he said.

“I am at your service, sir,” quoth Richard.

Lot, his red face still aflame, turned back to meet his father. The baronet was taking snuff with great asperity. He glared at his son, and spoke to him in an angry whisper.

“What devil’s mess have you been brewing here, sir?”

Mr. Lancelot’s blue eyes flashed.

“Dick Wilson, the painter fellow, was here,” he said.

“Dick Wilson!”

“That old beldam brought him with her from Rodenham. Jill fainted when she saw the fellow. Damme, sir, I will have it out with Cousin Richard. I can’t fight the old she-dog or the oilman, but I can fight Richard.”

Sir Peter whistled softly, puffing out his fat, red cheeks.

“Good Lord, Lot,” he said, “here’s a pretty ending to our party. Damn the old woman. Egad, you’d better get Jilian to bed.”

“And to-morrow,” quoth Mr. Lot, savagely, “I will talk with Cousin Richard.”

XII

An almost sanctified silence descended upon the interior of the Rodenham coach as the cumbrous carriage lumbered and creaked homeward over the heath that night. It was as though the three inmates travelled half in awe of one another, and were afraid to grapple with the mystery of the situation. The Lady Letitia sat stiffly in her corner, a statuesque and repellent figure in the dusk, while Richard Wilson, feeling very miserable and foolish, remained bolt upright, his knees and toes together, his round face still glistening with sweat. Jeffray lay back against the cushions, staring at the painter with obfuscated curiosity, and trying to explain to himself Miss Hardacre's fainting fit and Cousin Lot's savage attack on Wilson in the hall.

First a few irrelevant remarks passed between the three as the coach rolled on under the stars through the desolate wastes of Pevensel. The road was heavy, and the horses tugged and strained at the traces, the coach rolling on its high springs. They could hear the man-servant's toes knocking against the panelling as he sat perched on the back seat and clung to the rail as the wheels plunged and bumped into the ruts.

Richard appeared to rouse himself of a sudden. He turned to his aunt and frankly desired her to translate to him the meaning of the strange scene he had witnessed at Hardacre. The Lady Letitia appeared deaf for a moment amid the jangling of the harness and the laboring of the wheels. When she was compelled at last to understand the nature of her nephew's question, she shrugged her shoulders and wrapped her shawl closer about her neck.

"Don't ask me, Richard," she said; "you had better request Mr. Wilson to give you an explanation before you go to bed."

The painter groaned in spirit and looked pathetically at the old lady.

"I am sure, madam," he said, humbly, "it would have been better if I had not taken your advice."

"Advice! More mysterious," quoth Jeffray, losing patience.

The Lady Letitia rustled her silks in the corner; her eyes were fixed upon Wilson's face, a lugubrious patch of white in the gloom of the coach.

"Sir," she said, "I am beginning to think that you have not been quite frank with me. There must have been more in the affair than you have confessed. I never saw a wench so flustered in my life."

Wilson shrugged his shoulders in despair.

"I will endeavor to explain the matter to Mr. Jeffray," he said, ruefully; "to be sure I have made a deuced fine fool of myself, and shamed my own friend's

hospitality. You will do me justice, madam, by remembering that I had no liking to attend this ball."

"Mr. Wilson," quoth the dowager, frigidly, "it is clear that I never knew the true state of the case."

"Perhaps not, madam; perhaps not."

Meanwhile Richard laid his hand on the painter's knee.

"Don't vex yourself, Dick," he said, beginning to suspect the Lady Letitia's diplomacies, "we will talk it over together when we get home."

When the coach drew up before the priory, Richard gave his aunt his arm up the steps into the hall. Very much upon her dignity, she gave Mr. Wilson and her nephew a very stately courtesy, and swept away up the great staircase to her chamber. The atmosphere seemed to lighten somewhat on the dowager's departure. Richard ordered Gladden to light the candles in the library where a fire was still burning, and to bring up a bottle of port from the cellar. He laid his hand on Wilson's shoulder, who was pacing restlessly up and down the hall, his sword clapping to and fro against his muscular calves. They went into the library together, took pipes and the Virginia-box from the cupboard beside the chimney, and settled themselves before the fire. Peter Gladden came in with an uncorked bottle and glasses upon a tray. Wilson rose up, unbuckled his sword with a prodigious sigh, drank down a bumper, and waited till the butler had closed the door.

"Richard Jeffray," he said, with more vivacity, as though eager to unburden his soul now that they were alone, "I can't tell you, sir, what a sorry fool I feel after this night's business."

Jeffray, who had never grasped the full significance of the scene in the great hall at Hardacre, smiled at the painter as he filled his pipe.

"I am in an utter fog, Dick," he said; "what made Miss Jilian faint, and what the devil were you and Lot quarrelling about as though there had been some old feud between you. You painted Sir Peter's portrait once, eh?"

"Paint it, sir? I should think I did paint it," quoth Wilson, savagely; "and had I not been an unplucked fool I should never have gone to that ball to-night. A pretty stew I've brewed for you, Richard. It was all that old woman's doing. Damme, sir, why did I listen to her palaver!"

The painter's red face was a study in shame, wrath, and irritable contrition. His pipe spluttered as though to be in sympathy with its master's temper. Jeffray, still mystified, could not help a smile at Wilson's distress.

"What made Miss Hardacre faint, Dick?" he asked, in all innocence.

"What made her faint, sir!"

"To be sure."

"My accursed face, Richard Jeffray. I was mad enough to think of marrying her ten years ago."

Jeffray, who was in the act of lighting his pipe, dropped the lighted spill upon the floor and sat staring open-mouthed at Wilson.

"What!" he said.

"You may well look blank, sir. It is how Dick Wilson is feeling. Upon my soul, lad, I think Lot Hardacre did well when he slapped my silly face."

Jeffray, who had recovered himself, put his foot upon the burning spill, took another from the pot, held it over the fire, and lit his pipe. He puffed steadily for some moments, lying back in his chair with a peculiar calmness upon his face, and then turned again to Wilson.

"Tell me all about it, Dick," he said.

"Shall I?"

"It is better that I should know."

Wilson settled himself irritably in his chair and stared at the fire.

"Ten years ago," he said, "when I was a better-looking fellow than I am now, and when I was making money with my portraits, I painted Sir Peter Hardacre and his daughter. They had a house in town, sir, then, and Miss Jilian was as pretty a young lady as ever charmed the beaux of St. James's. Well, sir, I fell in love with the girl while I was painting her, and a mighty long time I took over that picture, and a mighty fine portrait I thought it. 'Did not Hogarth marry old Sir James Thornhill's daughter,' said I, 'and why should I not win this goddess myself?' She bribed her maid, sir, and used to come to my studio to see me paint. I don't think it was quite honorable of me, Richard Jeffray, I know now that it was not wise. Well, some old hag who had a grudge against Sir Peter got hold of our secret, and put it about town that there was an intrigue between us. Egad, sir, what an infernal pother there was! Sir Peter sent his own son and some young bullies to bludgeon me in my own studio. I still have the mark of one of their sticks on my asinine pate. It was a bad business, Richard, though we were both of us innocent as lambs."

Jeffray sat and watched the painter's face. He had never hinted to Wilson that he himself was on the verge of a betrothal with this very Miss Hardacre, nor had the Lady Letitia dropped a syllable upon the subject. The revelation had come as something of a shock to Jeffray's sensitive nature. He began to suspect that certain of his aunt's scandals might be true, and that the sweet Jilian had lost much of the bloom of her unkissed maidenhood. Wilson professed to deal with a romance that had blossomed ten years ago, and Jeffray seemed to see of a sudden a whole ghastly array of subsequent gallants rising before him to impeach Miss Hardacre's unsophisticated soul.

"I am sorry, Dick," he said, "that we persuaded you to go to Hardacre. If you had warned me—this might have been prevented."

Wilson sat with his chin upon his chest, smoking vigorously, and staring at the fire.

"True, very true, sir," he said, patiently. "I am afraid I have been misled by your

aunt, sir, who professed to know all about the romance. She swore to me, Richard, that it was an affair of the past, and that no people of fashion ever distressed themselves about such things. Why, Richard, she even told me that the Hardacres were ready to welcome me as a friend of yours."

Jeffray sat up suddenly in his chair, his pale face flushing as the truth appeared.

"Miss Hardacre never knew your name, Dick," he persisted.

"Deuce take me, sir, she must have known it. Your revered relative herself assured me that there was no reason why I should not present myself at Hardacre."

"Aunt Letitia told you that?"

"Why, at the rout to-night, sir, she came to tell me that Miss Hardacre had been inquiring for me. She made me unmask, sir, marched me up to the girl, shouted out my name, after that—came the deluge."

Richard twisted in his chair and swore. He understood now how the affair had come about. It had been a carefully spun plot upon the part of the Lady Letitia, and poor Wilson had been duped into lending himself to her plans. Richard realized that the dowager's excessive graciousness towards the painter had been nothing but diplomatic cunning to lure Dick into the toils.

"I understand it all now, Dick," he said, rising, and helping himself to another glass of wine.

"That's more than I can say, sir."

Jeffray drew himself up as though to surrender the unpleasant truth.

"We have both of us been fooled by my august relative," he said. "I must confess to you, Dick, that I have been courting Miss Jilian Hardacre, and that the Lady Letitia is prejudiced against the girl. She has tried before to embroil me with the Hardacres. She persuaded you to go to the ball, Dick, in order to create a scene and prevent my becoming betrothed to the lady."

Dick Wilson's face expressed astonished and indescribable distress. He put his pipe aside, rose up stammering and blushing, blundered across to where Jeffray was standing, and looked at him as though ready to weep.

"God bless my soul, Richard," he said, "I would rather have lost my right hand than that this should have happened."

"It was no fault of yours, Dick."

"Good Heavens, sir, how can I express my shame and regret! I wish my ugly carcass had never come within ten miles of this place. I am overwhelmed, sir, overwhelmed. I must leave your house at once."

Jeffray smiled and laid his hand on the painter's shoulder.

"It was my aunt's fault, Dick," he said, simply, "and we have both been made to dance like a couple of dolls. As for your leaving Rodenham, I shall not hear of it."

Wilson, still thoroughly ashamed, gripped Jeffray's hand, and then turned away

to blow his nose.

"No, no, sir," he said, "I have made an infernal mess of your affairs, and I cannot eat your food another day. Egad, though, I was forgetting that Mr. Hardacre may desire to justify his sister's honor."

"That is my business, Dick."

"And do you think, sir, that Richard Wilson will run away? No, no. I tell you I will go down and take a room at the inn, and if Mr. Hardacre wants me he will find me there. I am ready to make him and his sister a handsome apology, Richard, for he is in the right and I am in the wrong. If he will not take my apology, sir, then he must put a bullet into me to satisfy his sister's honor. It was my fault, Richard, for being such a damned egregious fool. Perhaps I can mend the quarrel for you, and I am not going to shirk the responsibility."

Jeffray could make no impression upon the painter, who was as stubborn as any Sussex boor in his determination to quit the house.

"Well, Dick," he said, as he lighted the painter to his room, "you can go down to the Wheat Sheaf to-morrow and put up there till the quarrel blows over."

Wilson shook his head as he stood to say good-night to Jeffray on the landing.

"No, sir," he said, "the quarrel has been of my making, and even if the lady forgives you for being my friend, it would not please her to know that I was still at Rodenham."

"But we are not betrothed yet," Jeffray argued.

"If you love her, sir, I presume this idle affair will make no change in your affection. There was nothing to shame her so far as I was concerned, and to be sure she is a little old for you, but then—"

Wilson hesitated suddenly, screwed up his eyes, and looked at the lad with critical curiosity. It had not occurred to him before that there was some disparity between their years. He had been so immersed also in Miss Hardacre's past that he had not given much thought to the present.

"I suppose you like her, lad, eh?"

"She has been very kind to me, Dick."

"So."

"I mean to act like a man of honor."

"One thing is certain, sir, that Dick Wilson is better out of the way. Good-night, Richard, you have been very kind to me, and I thank you. Egad, sir, I shall never forgive myself for having served you thus."

"We are still friends, Dick."

"Yes, sir, till you are married to Miss Hardacre. Well, it's a queer world. Good-night, lad, good-night."

The Lady Letitia kept her bed next day, but sent down a sealed note to her

nephew in which she expressed herself as being greatly distressed by what had passed the previous night. She advised Richard "to persuade that unfortunate creature Wilson to take his departure with all despatch." The dowager threw out many broad hints reflecting upon the sincerity of the painter's statements, and suggested to Richard that Miss Hardacre must have compromised herself with the man many years ago. Jeffray threw the letter in the fire. He was beginning to discover how much veracity there was in Aunt Letitia's world-wise soul.

Richard ordered Peter Gladden to go down in person and engage a room for Wilson at the Wheat Sheaf. Wilson's pack and red bundle were carried down to the inn by a very scornful and unobsequious servant who believed that no real gentleman would travel with such luggage, and who also doubted the likelihood of such a "shabby creature" being able to distribute decent largesse. Richard and the painter breakfasted together, smoked their pipes in the library afterwards, and discussed the dilemma once again. It appeared to Wilson that the young Squire of Rodenham was not madly enamoured of Miss Jilian Hardacre. "She had been very kind to him, yes. He thought her a sweet woman, despite his aunt's scandalous innuendoes. Certainly he had paid his cousin a great deal of attention, and he would act honorably by her like an English gentleman." Wilson screwed his face up a little over the lad's chivalrous sentiments. He did not venture to meddle with so delicate a question, however, having had sufficient excitement to satisfy him for months.

Jeffray walked with Wilson through the park to Rodenham village, the painter dressed again in his cocked hat, rusty brown suit and club-tailed wig. The day was Shrove-Tuesday, as Jeffray would have discovered earlier had he invaded his own kitchen and found the grooms and wenches tossing pancakes. Rodenham village itself was in a holiday temper, the boors turning out in clean smocks, the girls and women tricked out in their best gowns, with ribbon in their hair and new scarlet stockings showing under their short petticoats. Even the brats had had their faces polished and been blessed with clean pinafores. The benches in front of the Wheat Sheaf were ladened with farmers who had come in to drink George Gogg's beer and watch the "cock-throwing." Old Sam Sturtevant, the cobbler, had been training a couple of cocks since Christmas, and the birds were as nimble and spry at the game as could be. Sam was engaged with a crowd of hinds in pegging out one of his birds upon the green, and in kicking a line in the turf to show where the thrower should stand, when Jeffray and the painter passed the church and came down the road leading to the village with its wood and plaster fronts, its thatched roofs and sour and ragged gardens.

The sport sacred to Shrove-Tuesday had begun as Richard and the painter came down towards the green. A crowd of jabbering, hairy-faced boors were swearing and screaming on the grass. Some twenty paces distant from the crowd of hinds and slatterns, Sam Sturtevant, the cobbler, was holding one of his trained cocks by a string fastened to the leg. A rustic was in the act of taking his three shots for a penny at the bird, the object being to knock the cock down, and run and catch him before

he could recover his legs. So well trained was the bird that he dodged each cast of the stick, the crowd jeering and laughing as the fellow lost his penny to the cobbler. The next gentleman was more clever in his throwing. Richard saw the bird go down on the grass, a twitching and fluttering mass of feathers. The cock recovered himself, however, before the fellow could reach him, and the stick-throwing recommenced amid the shouts of the spectators.

Richard Jeffray had never seen the sport since the days when he was a mere animal of a boy. His eyes flashed in his pale face; his mouth hardened. Crossing the road with Wilson at his heels, he looked round angrily at the boors, who had abated their yelling on the Squire's approach, and had pulled off their hats and were louting and grinning in their uncouth way. Richard went up to the cobbler, an old man with a flinty face, whose eyes were glistening over the pence his cock had earned for him.

"Maybe Mr. Jeffray would like a shy," he said, with a leer, while the hinds crowded round with grinning faces.

Jeffray glanced at the bird that was staggering about on a broken leg.

"Do you call this sport, men?" he asked, hotly.

The cobbler stared and appeared puzzled. The ring of brutish faces gathered closer.

"There be'nt no harm in it, yer honor," he said.

Jeffray promptly pulled out his purse and offered to buy the cobbler's birds. The boors stared at one another, and began to murmur.

"Begging yer honor's pardon," quoth the mender of shoes, "these birds of mine be'nt for buying."

"You prefer to torture them, Sturtevant, eh?"

The man scratched his head and glanced at his friends for justification.

"There always be cock-throwing on Shrove-Tuesdays, Mr. Jeffray," he said. "Parson Sugg has never said aught agen it."

"That be so, Sam," added several rough voices.

Wilson, who had pushed through the crowd, laid his hand on Jeffray's shoulder and looked meaningly in his face.

"Let them alone, sir," he said, in an undertone; "they won't understand your fine philosophy."

"This is mere brutality, Dick."

"Egad, sir, if you begin reforming the British nation you will be ducked like Wesley in the horse-pond."

Jeffray, feeling himself humiliated before the grinning and contemptuous faces of the men, turned and walked away with Wilson towards the inn. An outburst of coarse laughter followed him. One fellow put his thumb to his nose and spread his

fingers behind Jeffray's back. Another made a certain indescribable noise that condensed the contempt of these "pastoral swains."

"Lamentable soft, the Squire, be'nt he, Sam?"

"Poor sort of foreigner, I reckon."

"Sing'lar young man. Poor, skinny-looking fox as ever I see. Better be mindin' of his own business. Lookee, Cloddy, it be your shy, man."

They returned to their cock-baiting with rough laughter, and much lewd jeering and cursing one with another. Jeffray and the painter had neared the Wheat Sheaf where half a score red-faced farmers were gossiping and drinking beer on the benches about the wooden tables. They exchanged winks and grimaces, and pulled off their hats to Jeffray with mock politeness. George Gogg, the innkeeper, came out to meet the master of Rodenham, cloaking his personal and obese contempt for the young Squire under an air of almost offensive servility. As Jeffray passed through the bar with Wilson towards the private parlor, he became aware of a big man in a green coat staring at him from a bench in the chimney-corner. Richard, baffled for the moment, remembered where he had seen the fellow's face before. It was Dan Grimshaw, of Pevensel. As for a contrast Bess's face flashed up before him, its lips like a thread of scarlet, its black hair streaming above the fierce blue eyes.

XIII

Miss Jilian soon recovered from her faint in the great hall at Hardacre, thanks to sprinklings with scent and the immediate application of a smelling-bottle to her nose. Miss Hardacre had seen nothing of the foolish quarrel between Dick Wilson and Mr. Lot, and with true discretion she insisted on dancing the night out, vowing that she had only temporarily succumbed to the heat. A few words passed between brother and sister before the musicians struck up in the gallery, and Mr. Lancelot led out his sister to a country-dance. Though Sir Peter busied himself ostentatiously in seeing that certain of the hall windows were opened for the sake of ventilation, there was much secret wagging of tongues amid the company, much bobbing of plumes, much wise gossip. Several reasons were spread abroad to account for the affair and the sudden departure of the party for Rodenham. Miss Jilian, however, rose bravely superior to the past, smiled and swept courtesies, drank wine to give herself a color. She even coquetted with Mr. Gedge, one of her brother's boon comrades, for the rest of the evening, carrying her amber head very high, and showing no symptoms of cowardice or distress.

The following morning, however, Miss Hardacre was very viciously afflicted with the vapors. She kept her bed, would not so much as suffer her maid to draw her curtains, and left untouched the chocolate the sympathetic handmaid pressed upon her. Her one command was that Sir Peter should be informed that she was vaporish, and would be pleased to see him if he would walk up-stairs. The baronet, after finishing his breakfast and swearing at Lot for making such a pother the preceding night, gathered himself together and tramped up the broad staircase to pay his respects to his daughter.

The red curtains were half drawn across the windows of Miss Jilian's room. An odor of lavender pervaded the atmosphere, and the four-post bed, with its pink-and-white hangings, looked like a shrine where love might claim sanctuary. Miss Hardacre's ball dress lay thrown across a chair. Her cosmetics and wash-balls were untouched on the table below her mirror. The fair Jilian herself lay back on her belaced pillows, looking rather thin and old, her tawny hair in a tangle, her mouth adroop in her white face.

Sir Peter thrust a pair of satin slippers aside with his foot, gurgled, took snuff, tossed sundry belaced vestments from a chair, and sat himself down beside the bed. The baronet gazed at his daughter with stupid gravity, and heaved a sigh under his snuffy waistcoat.

"Well, lass, how are you feeling?"

There was some rustling of the belaced bed-gown, a pair of shoulders began to twitch spasmodically, a handkerchief fluttered out, a pathetic signal of distress.

“Damn it, Jill, don’t let’s play at snivelling.”

Sir Peter’s irritable method of showing his sympathy only distressed the sweet martyr the more. There were chokings and moist miseries under the pink-and-white canopy. Miss Hardacre’s pretty feet twitched and fidgeted under the clothes, while she half buried her face in the pillow and sobbed with unction.

“Bless my soul, Jill, you ain’t a baby no longer—to play at the snivels.”

“Oh, Sir Peter, you are brutal!” came the choking reproof from the pillow.

“Drat it, lass, what are you blubbering for? There’s no great harm done, eh? Lot will see to the Hardacre honor.”

Miss Hardacre’s sobs seemed to grow less hysterical. She thrust a bare arm out of the bed, a wealth of lace hanging about the elbow. Sir Peter, who looked hot, angry, and unhappy, was at some pains to console his daughter. He took her hand and patted it parentally.

“There, there, lass; what shall we do for ye, eh?”

“Tell Lot—”

“Tell Lot. What am I to tell Lot, eh?”

“Not to quarrel with poor Richard—”

“Damn the lad, Jilian, don’t you take on so. Richard Jeffray’s a little gentleman, and I’ll take my immortal oath that it was all that old she-dog’s doing. Lot is for riding to Rodenham to demand an explanation.”

Miss Hardacre pressed her father’s hand and mopped her eyes with her lace handkerchief. Her bones showed somewhat at the base of her neck, and she looked less plump when unadorned.

“La, Sir Peter, I am very miserable,” she whimpered. “Richard and I were so happy together last night. Why should that old woman try to spoil our happiness? It was cruel of her, sir, to bring that painter fellow to Hardacre. Such an old affair, too; I was only a silly child then.”

Sir Peter swore, and fumbled for his snuffbox.

“Don’t you eat your heart out, Jill,” he said; “Lot shall see to it. Richard Jeffray shall prove that he is a gentleman.”

Miss Hardacre started up in bed upon her elbow, and held out an appealing hand towards her father.

“Don’t let there be any quarrelling; I couldn’t bear to think—”

“There, there,” interposed the baronet, with a sniff; “what a tender goose it is! You leave it to me, Jill. We will see that you are treated like a lady.”

Sir Peter kissed his daughter, and trudged downstairs, blowing his nose. He found Lot in the dining-room with his feet propped against one of the carved jambs of the fireplace, a pipe hanging out of the corner of his mouth, and his rather bleary eyes scanning the pages of a gazette. Lot dropped his feet and swung round in his

chair as his father entered, took his pipe from his mouth, and grinned.

"How's the angelic Jill?" he asked, laconically.

"Damned vaporish, sir. Hopes you won't hurt the poor lad. 'Twould break her heart to think of your drawing your sword on him."

Lot laughed and knocked out his pipe on the heel of his shoe.

"She's a clever one, is Jilian," he said. "Egad, sir, she has given me the wink. Break her sweet heart, the dear, tough wench! I must foot it nobly, sir, before my cousin, the poet, smite my brotherly bussum, and cry, 'Behold, sir, here lies a brother's honor.' Richard's a sweet, trustful lad. Leave him to me, sir; I'll see that Jill has her husband."

The baronet chuckled, and sat down in his leather-bottomed chair before the fire. He lay back, exposing his generous paunch, and winked at his son over his shoulder.

"Richard will make a good son-in-law, Lot," he observed.

"Jill will milk his pockets for him, sir."

Sir Peter nodded and beamed greedily.

"And we'll have some of the butter, Lot," he said; "an easy mortgage would be deuced convenient. What does the young dog want with all his thousands lying idle? They would serve us better than they would him. We want a new coach and a new stud, and, damme, I should like a house in town again. Dick Jeffray's a nice lad, Lot. When do you think of riding over to Rodenham?"

Mr. Hardacre yawned, stretched his legs, and looked cunningly at his father.

"This afternoon, sir," he said, with a grin. "The old harridan thinks she has spoiled our sport, but I guess she has given us a great opportunity. I will put it to Mr. Richard like a brother. If he don't see it in the sentimental light, sir, I'll just do a little bullying."

"And have Jill weeping over his grave!"

Mr. Lot laughed loudly and thumped his chest.

"You'll do it all right, Lot," said the baronet; "damme, you will."

"Leave him to me, sir. Sister Jill shall have her husband."

Thus, with the wind blowing briskly through Pevensel and the clouds rolling like great purple chariots over the distant downs, Mr. Lancelot rode out in quest of the Hardacre honor, and came trotting through Rodenham park betwixt the beeches and the cedars. Mr. Lot was dressed in his best brown riding-suit, with a silver-mounted sword at his side, and a new tie-wig perched on his solid round pate. His blue eyes twinkled in his fiery face, and he swore softly to himself and patted his horse's neck. Gladden answered the clanging bell with the usual inscrutable smirk upon his face. Mr. Hardacre announced the fact that he desired to see Mr. Jeffray alone, his manner demanding unequivocal obedience on the part of the butler. Richard was reading in the library at the moment, having left Dick Wilson at the inn. The Lady Letitia still kept her chamber, having sent word to her nephew that

she was still prostrated after the unpleasant experiences of the night.

Mr. Lot had been ushered into the red parlor, and Richard found him strutting up and down before the windows that overlooked the park, his sword cocked under his coat-tails in very militant fashion. He bowed with unusual courtliness, and posed very creditably as a cavalier without reproach. Richard felt decidedly oppressed by his cousin's portentous dignity. All the evidences of a determination to claim the right of politely murdering him appeared in Mr. Hardacre's manner.

Jeffray desired Mr. Hardacre to be seated. Lot waved the proffered chair aside, and stood to the majestic moment with astonishing grandiosity.

"Cousin Richard," he said, with another bow, "you doubtless recognize the delicacy of the errand that has brought me to Rodenham."

Richard blushed and looked uncomfortable.

"You refer to the affair of last night, Lot," he answered.

"Egad, sir, I do. It is my right as Miss Hardacre's brother to demand an explanation from you, sir, with regard to the unwarrantable introduction of this Mr. Wilson into our house."

Richard was still blushing and looking honestly distressed. He glanced appealingly at his cousin's righteous face, and promptly plunged into a rambling and eager explanation of the affair, expressing his ardent regret at what had happened, and exonerating both Wilson and himself from the charge of premeditated mischief-making. Mr. Lot nodded very solemnly at every sentence, keeping his eyes fixed severely upon his cousin's face, and still cocking his sword with aggressive significance.

"So you will see, Lot," said the lad, frankly, at the end of his speech, "that I was utterly innocent of any desire to offend. God knows, sir, I was as miserable as a man could be over such a regrettable error. I can only offer you my apologies and ask you and Sir Peter to forgive me."

Mr. Lancelot bowed and smiled with some grimness.

"Egad, cousin," he said, "I am glad to find you in so reasonable a temper. I can tell you, Richard, my blood was up, and when Lot Hardacre is roused—he is a bit of a devil, sir."

Richard, hot and eager, like the generous fellow he was, to salve the wounded Hardacre pride, held out his hand to Lot with a brave smile.

"Your anger does you honor, Lot," he said. "Had I such a sister I should be terribly jealous for her."

Mr. Hardacre glanced at Jeffray's hand reflectively, and then shook it.

"Deuce take me, Richard," he said, "I knew you were a lad of the right temper. As for Dick Wilson, I broke his pate once, poor devil, when Jill was a mere bread-and-butter simpleton, and he had the impudence to fall in love with her. A pretty little jest, Richard, nothing more. It was the old lady above, sir, who poisoned the

posset."

Jeffray was sincerely relieved to find Mr. Lancelot mellowing into such a brotherly humor.

"Poor Wilson was as much concerned as I was, Lot," he said. "The Lady Letitia fibbed him into believing that he could present himself at Hardacre. I knew nothing of the matter till last night. Wilson is staying for a day at the Wheat Sheaf down in the village to offer you his apologies, or honorable satisfaction, should you require it."

Mr. Lot laughed good-humoredly, and reduced the cock of his sword.

"I don't want to quarrel with the poor devil, Richard," he said. "You were both of you lambs sucking sour milk from the old dam above. I only desired, sir, to see justice done to my sister."

Richard, blushing guiltily, looked with some shyness at his cousin.

"How is Jilian?" he asked.

Lot's face seized upon a most lugubrious expression. He shook his head, and looked with significant pathos at Richard.

"Poor wench, she is in a terrible way—"

"Lot, I am miserably distressed."

"She begged me to make no quarrel in the matter; swore it was no fault of yours; wanted me to promise that I would not lose my temper."

Richard listened, looking the embodiment of generous contrition. What an angel this sweet cousin of his was, to be sure! Of course Jilian had had little romances after she had come fresh from school. What girl had not? And had not he, Richard Jeffray, brought all this distress upon her?

"Lot," he said, "I am not worthy to kiss your sister's hand. Do you think that she will forgive me?"

Mr. Lancelot appeared profoundly serious, and glanced at his cousin under wrinkled brows.

"Jill has a deuced kind heart, Dick," he said.

"Can I see her to-morrow?"

"The lass has been much shaken, cousin; she kept her bed this morning."

Richard, looking a fine and honest fellow with his eyes bright in his flushed face, held out his hands to his cousin.

"Be my friend, Lot," he said, "and persuade Jilian to let me see her. I am a man of honor, sir, and your sister is a saint. Say I will ride over to-morrow in the hope that she will see me."

Mr. Lot studied his cousin keenly and smiled. The lad was honest and generous enough; there would be no need of bullying.

"Egad, Richard," he exclaimed, "you are a fine fellow, sir, and Lot Hardacre is

with you. Poor Jill has a tender heart, cousin. I'll try to get her to see you; I will. Sir Peter, too, is in a swearing rage, Richard, but I'll get old Stott over and have the governor bled."

Richard, with tears in his eyes, gripped his cousin's hand.

"Thank you, Lot," he said—"thank you. You are a friend in need—by Heaven, you are! As for my aunt, she shall leave Rodenham at once."

Mr. Hardacre clapped Jeffray on the shoulder.

"That's the tune, my buck," he said, heartily; "be the master in your own house, Richard, and don't be grandmothered by any old woman. Why, she would quarrel with you if you were for marrying St. Agnes, by gad, she would. Have it out with her, cousin; she's been treating you like a foot-boy. I wouldn't stand it, sir; I wouldn't."

Richard smiled a little ruefully, pressed his cousin's red hand again, and accompanied him to the porch. Mr. Lot mounted on the terrace, flashed a keen look at his cousin, and took leave of him with boisterous good-humor.

"Get to the windward of her, Richard," he said, meaningly. "Give her a broadside or two and she'll strike. Damn it, cousin, don't be a charity boy in your own house."

"To-morrow, Lot—"

"I'll do my best, Richard, by gad, I will. Lot Hardacre's your friend, cousin, don't you doubt it."

Richard watched his kinsman ride away, and then went back to the library somewhat hot about the eyes. He was glad that the quarrel was ending so peaceably, and what an angel of sweetness Miss Jilian was, to be sure! Yes, he was ready to go down on his knees and ask her pardon, yet—why did Bess's face flash up before him of a sudden? Well, he would go down to the Wheat Sheaf and tell Wilson what had happened. And then—then he must do battle with Aunt Letitia.

XIV

Jeffray, much impressed by Mr. Lancelot's brotherly ardor, trudged down across the park that evening and took the road to Rodenham village. The Shrovetide cock-throwing was at an end, and beer had succeeded to brutality. Villagers were shouting and singing in front of the inn, where a fuddled old fiddler with a wooden leg sat perched on a barrel, scraping away at his violin. The red, hairy faces, with their animal laughter and their vociferous mouths, made the master of Rodenham shudder. A number of lads and wenches were racing and scrimmaging on the green, tumbling one another upon the grass, their coarse laughter sounding through the village. Jeffray pushed through the crowd towards the inn, holding his head high and turning his flushed face neither to the right nor the left. He found Wilson in the private parlor dining on steak and potatoes, with a pot of porter at his elbow. The painter sprang up and gripped Jeffray's hand as the lad blurted out the result of his conference with Mr. Lot. Wilson's rough face brightened. He wiped his great mouth, and looked at Richard with affection.

"Ah, sir," he said, "I am glad to hear the sky is clearing. There is a weight, Richard, a great weight off my mind. I was not afraid, sir, of Mr. Hardacre's sword, but I was afraid of injuring your happiness."

Jeffray sat down and talked to Wilson, while the painter, after blunt apologies, went on with his dinner. Richard was for having Wilson back at Rodenham, but the honest fellow would consent to no such diplomatic error.

"No, no, Richard," he said, after a pull at the pot, "I am best away, sir, at such a crisis, though I thank you heartily for your kindness. I shall tramp on to Lewes and see more of these glorious fellows—the downs. I have money in my purse, and, egad, what irony, I won some of it from your august aunt at cards. I believe she let me win it, sir, to keep me in a good temper, and the cash will pay for the portrait I painted. I shall come back by this road, Richard, and if I slink in for a meal at Rodenham you must not be amazed."

"Come when you will, Dick," said Jeffray, "the priory will be open to you when this quarrel is at end. Jilian has a kind heart; she will not grudge me a friend."

Wilson shook his head and smiled shrewdly.

"I have no desire to make experiments, sir," he said; "and if I turn in to see you, it will only be for a short day. If you have a priest's hiding-hole at Rodenham, you might put it at my service for a night. Take my advice, Richard, and don't fling my name in Miss Hardacre's face. There are some things women like to leave in the lumber-room. Lud, what an infernal din those boors are making!"

Jeffray said farewell to the painter with no little regret, for he was one of the few

men he had met to whom he could confide his poetical enthusiasm. There was a goodly world of beauty behind Richard Wilson's ugly face. Jeffray walked back to Rodenham with a grave sense of responsibility increasing upon him. The Lady Letitia had sent word that she would come down to sup with her nephew, and Richard dreaded not a little the ordeal that loomed across the night. No doubt his aunt had heard of Mr. Hardacre's visit. Jeffray had need of some of the courage of a Perseus to face this acrimonious and awe-inspiring dame.

The Lady Letitia's attitude and expression may be imagined when Jeffray, looking pale but very composed, informed her that it would be necessary for her to leave Rodenham in her coach. The old lady expressed the most haughty astonishment, scanned her nephew as though he were an impudent urchin of ten, and began to insist that Wilson, the painter fellow, was a most unprincipled liar. Had he not occasioned all the disturbance at Hardacre by deceiving the dear old lady as to the nature of his past association with Miss Jilian? Was Richard Jeffray going to bundle his father's sister out of his house as though she were no better than some unfortunate slut? Angels and martyrs, the Lady Letitia had no intention of stomaching such arbitrary treatment. She had pride, sir, and if her presence caused her nephew any inconvenience, she could take her departure without orders.

Richard held his tongue and kept his temper throughout the dowager's explosive harangue, sitting with pale face and compressed mouth, and drumming on the table with his fingers.

"You will pardon me, madam," he said, very politely, "but for the present peace of the neighborhood I conceive it expedient for you to leave Rodenham—for a time."

The old lady's red nose admonished her nephew. She twitched her eyebrows, flapped and fluttered with her fan, looking outraged both as to pride and affection.

"Certainly, my dear nephew," she said, with an ironical twist of the mouth. "I am a little older than Miss Jilian Hardacre. We are both of us out of temper, sweet Jill and your old aunt, and when two cats will quarrel under one's bedroom one of 'em must be silenced. Precisely so, my dear Richard; I will cumber your hospitality no longer."

Jeffray, flushed and uncomfortable, and suffering the usual feelings of discourtesy and ingratitude that assail a young man on such occasions, clung to the conviction none the less, that the feud would not end without the Lady Letitia's departure.

"I am sorry, madam," he said, "that I am compelled to speak to you like this, but I shall be unable to quit myself as a man of honor to the Hardacres so long as you remain at Rodenham."

Aunt Letitia's eyes glittered as though it would please her to repeat a certain episode of her nephew's youth when she had tanned him royally with a slipper.

"Do not apologize, sir," she said; "perhaps you will have the goodness to tell me

whether I am to be ejected to-morrow, or will you grant me a week's respite to prepare for exile?"

"I pray you, consider your own convenience," returned Jeffray, blushing.

"I must send Parsons to The Wells to engage decent rooms for me. My bankers must be negotiated with. This is so sudden, sir, that you have caught me unprepared."

Jeffray suggested that he would be happy to oblige his aunt in any way that she might desire. Aunt Letitia frowned and played with her fan. The dowager's treasure-chest was nearly empty, and it would be a month or more before she could count upon the paying of her dividends. Could her nephew oblige her with a loan of a hundred guineas at an interest of five per cent.? Aunt Letitia appeared in no wise distressed by having to confide such delicate matters to her nephew. In fact, she built a grievance out of her inconveniences, and spoke with sarcastic significance of being "taken by so sudden a surprise." Richard, eager to salve the old lady's feelings, offered her a loan of two hundred guineas, repudiating the very thought of usury with scorn. Aunt Letitia clutched at the concession, and the interview ended with some symptoms of amiability, the dowager actually kissing her nephew before she hobbled off to bed.

Richard was in the saddle early next morning and away for Hardacre with the spring sun streaming down upon the greens and purples of Pevensel. The bright zest of the day was in his blood, generous and blithe as the spirit of youth itself. He was eager to crave Jilian's forgiveness, and to quit himself as his manhood prompted in the matter of saluting the Hardacre honor. Richard rode in the belief that he had shamed his kinswoman, and that he had bruised her kind heart by his aunt's duplicity.

With the thickets of Pevensel towering on every hand, Jeffray's thoughts sped back from Hardacre to the glowing face of Bess of the Woods. Richard, despite his sensitive obedience to the promptings of honor, could not think of the girl without a flush of feeling sweeping across his mind. Her face brought both mystery and gladness, deep witchery and a prophecy of pain. What was this tall, black-haired, lissome wench to him that she should make his heart beat louder as over the tragic breathing of some song? Richard, riding through Pevensel, strove to laugh such romantic memories away. Because the girl had a fine body and a passionate face, should he suffer his thoughts to dally with her in the deeps of her own mysterious woods? Yet despite his strainings after sanity he found himself wondering how she fared in the forest, whether Black Dan still pestered her, and whether she carried one of his pistols in her bosom?

In due course Jeffray came to Hardacre Chase where the oaks, gray and purple, with brown bracken beneath, strode down in giant companies upon the road. Mr. Lancelot, who had remained at home that morning in expectation of Jeffray's coming, met his cousin as he rode up to the gate house. There was a cheering smile upon Mr. Hardacre's face, for the inimitable Lot had no doubt at all of his sister's

willingness to forgive Richard Jeffray. Sir Peter, who happened to be standing in the oriel-window of the main gallery, had seen the young Squire of Rodenham ride up. The baronet and his son had discussed the problem that very morning.

"Good luck to ye, Richard," said Mr. Lot, with confidential solemnity. "I have had a terrible tussle with Sir Peter. Egad, cousin, I had to sweat to persuade the governor to let you see Jill. I'll take your horse. You know the room, Richard?"

Richard, who had dismounted, pressed Mr. Lancelot's hand.

"I shall not forget your kindness, Lot," he said.

"Bosh, sir, I always side with a man of spirit. Go up to her, cousin, and do your best. I'll see you're not interfered with."

Richard, blushing, turned away and entered the house. As for Mr. Lot, he thrust his hands deep into his breeches-pockets, looked after his cousin whimsically, and laughed.

What a sweet picture of sanctity met Mr. Richard's eyes as he opened the door of Miss Hardacre's parlor bashfully after his knock had been softly acknowledged! Miss Jilian was seated in the window-seat, dressed in a silky green gown that rippled like water as she rose to meet her cousin. There was much lace upon her bosom and a knot of red ribbon over her heart.

"Cousin Jilian."

Miss Hardacre let her eyes rest only for a moment on Richard's face. Jeffray was blushing very handsomely.

"Jilian, I have come to ask you to forgive me."

He went close to his cousin, and stood looking at her with humbled ardor on his face. Miss Hardacre appeared much distressed. Surely his sweet cousin's eyes were somewhat red and swollen. And were those wrinkles under the lids?

"Jilian, will you forgive me?"

"Oh, Richard!"

"Aunt Letitia made fools of both of us, Jilian. I have told her to leave my house."

Miss Hardacre hung her head and pressed her hands together.

"You know everything, Richard."

"Poor Wilson told me everything, and it was nothing, Jilian."

"I am a shamed and miserable woman."

"Shamed, Jilian? Let me hear any man breathe a word against you."

Miss Hardacre suffered her eyes to quaver up for a moment to Richard's face. The lad could see tears ready to well up into those pellucid wells of light.

"What can I say to you, Richard?" she said. "Oh, I am very miserable."

How could an honorable and generous youth refrain from going down on one knee, pressing the lady's hand to his lips, and gazing up with enthusiastic homage

into her face? The hot words were betwixt Richard's lips in a moment, and Miss Hardacre was hiding her blushes behind her hand.

And then, for the climax, Richard's lips pressed to Miss Jilian's, and Sir Peter, who had been listening shrewdly on the landing, standing with admirable dumfoundedness before the innocently opened door. Of course Miss Jilian gave a shy scream, and Richard, red as the lips he had kissed, turned to play the hero before the parental demigod.

"Sir Peter Hardacre," he said, with bashful dignity, "I have come to apologize to your daughter, sir, for the distress I innocently brought upon her the other night. I offer you my apologies, sir, also; I have always honored you, and you have been very kind to me."

The lad drew himself up creditably, squared his shoulders, and looked the baronet straight in the face.

"Egad, sir," quoth Sir Peter, glaring at his daughter and preparing to seem parental, "you appear quick at consoling the ladies. The Hardacre honor, sir—"

Mr. Richard became aware suddenly of a warm hand stealing into his. Miss Jilian gave him a look out of her gray eyes and a whispered word that carried a command. She went down on her knees before her father.

"What! Bless my soul, what's this, eh? Stars and garters, Jill, what am I to understand from this?"

"Cousin Richard has asked me to be his wife," said Miss Hardacre, with a divine simper.

"What!"

"With your consent, Sir Peter," added Cousin Richard, half grimly.

And Sir Peter, noble and forgiving soul, put his pride in his pocket, beamed, and blessed them!

XV

Jeffray left Hardacre House that afternoon with his betrothal an assured fact in the eyes of Christendom. The way the fog had melted before him of a sudden had surprised even the generous Squireling of Rodenham. He had expected an unnerving interview with Sir Peter, and possibly a very affecting one with Miss Jilian, and here—in a morning he found himself betrothed to the daughter and embraced and blessed by a future father. Jeffray could only admire in Sir Peter the workings of an admirable and manly spirit of forgiveness. As for Mr. Lot, Richard still felt the slap that worthy gentleman had given him upon the shoulder and the hearty way he had crunched his hand. Jilian had been wondrous sweet and coy with her betrothed, and Jeffray should have boasted himself happy in possessing the right to clasp such perfumed purity in his arms.

Was it the inevitable reaction after so much sweet ecstasy and such squanderings of sentiment that threw Richard into a decidedly melancholy mood after taking leave of his Jilian on the terrace? No doubt the parting from the lady should have accounted for the onset of such a humor, but Richard's inclinations were contrary to custom, since he desired to think and to be alone. Whether contact had crumbled up the romance, or whether the seriousness of the step bulked for the first time in Jeffray's mind, he found himself meditating on the affair with a chilly reasonableness that was not begotten in the rapturous school of Venus.

Why was it that Aunt Letitia's gibes and fables recurred with such vividness to his mind? He had not heeded them before the crisis; wherefore should he heed them now? He wished somehow that Wilson had not loved the girl ten years ago; ten years were ten years—despite idealism. What was amiss with him that the happy reunion of the morning lost some of its glamour and assumed the suggestive notion of a net? Surely he was not for recovering his own liberty, that liberty that had weighed as a mere feather in the balance against honor? Was not Jilian sweet and amiable, and still a girl, though older than himself? Surely he could imagine a father in Sir Peter and a worthy brother in honest Lot? And yet the vapor of melancholy persisted in Richard Jeffray's mind, despite his angry reasonings with himself. He had been happy in the morning, righteously and sincerely happy. Why this loosening of the cords of confidence, this morbid introspection that suggested the possibility of error.

The day was such a one as begets the ideal of spring in the heart, warm, fragrant, like a dewy dawn in June. The hills and valleys were bathed in silvery light, a light more delicate and rare than the glare of summer. All the colors of the landscape were soft and beautiful, the dusky greens, the purples, the browns, the blue mistiness of the distant downs. On the far hills beyond Pevensel a piece of ploughed

land would flash up almost as gold under the sun, or a chalk cliff glisten like foam at the throat of a bursting billow. The meadows in the lowlands were like a mosaic of emeralds set in silver.

Jeffray took the western track that plunged into Pevensel by White Hard Ghyll. The pines and firs stood out a rich and generous green against the sensitive azure of the sky, while the olive-colored trunks of the oaks upheld the purple feltwork of swelling buds above. The yellow palm was flashing in the breeze; primroses shone everywhere amid the moss and leaves. The ragged and tempestuous gorse flamed about the listening shadows of the woods. The track ran down into the wastes and crossed the stream that fretted by the ruins of the old Abbey of Holy Cross.

Richard had not seen the place since he had climbed and hunted there as a boy in the days when life flew fast and without thought. Holy Cross was a mile or more from the hamlet of the foresters, and perhaps some insensible magic drew Jeffray towards this relic of Popish power. The monastic calm, the glow of ancient memories, would be in keeping with the temper of the day. Certainly Mr. Richard was not anxious to return to the society of the Lady Letitia, and he found sufficient friendship in his thoughts. Yet the sly plea crept in amid the rest, for if chance favored him he might catch sight of Bess amid the woods, and learn how fortune had served her since she had nursed him in old Ursula's cottage.

He walked his horse down the hill that closed in Holy Cross on the north. He saw the ruined walls and the ragged remnant of a tower rising beyond the trees that covered the hill-side. A stream came glinting through the green to swell into a broad pool above the stone weir that the monks had built of old. The thunder of the fall filled the dreamy silence of the valley, as though chanting an eternal mass for the souls of those who had lived and died in Holy Cross.

He gave himself to these Gothic mysteries for a while before turning his horse towards the ford that crossed the stream some sixty yards above the weir. The weir pool was hidden by undergrowth and a clump of firs and birches. The sound of his horse's hoofs was deadened by the mossy grass as he rode down slowly from the ruins. As he rounded the birchen brake he saw something on the farther side of the stream that made him rein in suddenly.

Bess was sitting on a rock beside the pool, combing her hair with her fingers as it hung in a black mass over her shoulders. She looked up as Jeffray came splashing through the water, recognized him instantly, and flushed red as a poppy. A peculiar light kindled in her keen, blue eyes, softening their hardness, and making her face seem less petulant and heavy.

Jeffray dismounted and advanced towards her, leading his horse by the bridle. Bess had risen and came some paces to meet him, making no pretence to conceal her pleasure.

"Bess, I am glad I happened to take the track by the abbey."

"I am glad, also, Mr. Jeffray."

They looked at each other and smiled, instant sympathy flashing from face to face. Bess looked very handsome with her black hair about her, and Jeffray could not refrain from confessing the truth instinctively to himself. Never in all Italy had he seen such coloring, such eyes, or so fine a figure. To be sure her hands were a little red and rough, but they were prettily made, and suited her simple and brightly colored clothes.

"I have been wishing to see you," said the girl, beginning to bind up her black hair and watching Jeffray all the while.

"To see me, Bess?"

"They seem long days since I nursed you in our cottage."

Richard, good youth, experienced secret pleasure at the confession. The girl's voice, deep, rich, and slightly husky, contrasted strangely with Miss Jilian's prattle. She spoke slowly, as though with an inward effort, trying to temper her words to Jeffray's superior culture. It was done without affectation, however, and her quaint, slow way of mouthing her words had an irresistible charm in it that made Jeffray delight in hearing her speak.

"You have been bathing, Bess?"

She laughed, blushed a little, and began to coil up her hair over the curve of her long, brown neck.

"You might have caught me, Mr. Jeffray."

This time Richard colored.

"How are they treating you in Pevensel?" he made haste to ask.

"Treating me?"

"Yes."

"I am glad of your pistols."

Her expression changed suddenly from frankness to rebellion. Jeffray, who was studying her with a secret sense of delight, marked the hardening of her red mouth, the gleam in her fierce, far-sighted eyes. He had forgotten Miss Jilian completely for the moment, and the delicate and highly civilized sentiments that had made him throw his liberty at her feet.

"Tell me what your trouble is," he asked her.

"They are for marrying me to Dan."

"What!"

"They tried to force me into it. Mother Ursula was with them till Dan tried his bullying, and then she held him and his father off."

The expression on Richard's amiable face contradicted its habitual shinings towards sweetness.

"But, Bess, old Grimshaw promised me—"

"He's as bad as Dan," she said, with a snarl. "I hate—hate them both."

“They can’t marry you against your will.”

“Not while I have the pistols.”

There was a look almost suggestive of fear on her face for the moment, despite its spirit of defiance. She glanced round her swiftly, and drew closer to Jeffray.

“I am afraid of Dan.”

“Afraid, Bess?”

“Yes, as much as I am of anything.”

Jeffray understood her meaning of a sudden. His sensitive face grew strangely stern and thoughtful, and there was a tightness about his mouth, a steadiness in his eyes that would have puzzled Mr. Lancelot Hardacre.

“You keep the pistols by you?” he asked, quietly.

Bess pointed to the rock where her red cloak lay.

“See, one is there,” she said. “They are the best friends I have in Pevensel. I look to the priming every day.”

Jeffray’s usually smooth brow was still knotted in thought.

“I wonder if I could help you, Bess,” he said.

She gazed at him curiously, with one hand at her throat.

“Perhaps,” she answered.

“How?”

She glanced round her rapidly as though accustomed to fear what the woods might conceal. The sun was low in the west and the forest-clad valley full of golden mist. She took her cloak and pistol from the rock, and pointed to a path that branched off from the main ride into a larch-wood, telling Jeffray that they could reach the Beacon Rock heath by the path.

Thus with the shadows of the twilight stealing over the woods, and the birds piping lustily in every thicket, Bess and Richard Jeffray wandered through Pevensel together, looking with questioning youth into each other’s eyes. Bess began to tell him of the memories that stood like frail ghosts on the threshold of her forest life. She told him of the flitting fancies of other days, of the faces and scenes she but half remembered. Jeffray, impressed by her eager intensity of belief, reacted to the many suggestions her words inspired. He watched her as she walked beside him, tall, lissome, and convincing, her looks eloquent towards the proving of her childish memories. Jeffray had seen what country hoydens were worth in the matter of charm and of beauty, and had discovered pretty milkmaids to be a myth. Bess was as different from any Sussex Blowzelinda as a stately cypress from a dwarf oak outcrowded in some sodden wood.

When she had ended he turned to her with no little eagerness, as though her needs were already his.

“Have you ever spoken of this to any one?” he asked her.

Her face had kindled in the telling of the tale, and her eyes met Jeffray's and held them steadily.

"I have often spoken to old Ursula, but she has always laughed at me."

"And you have no trinkets or rings that might have come from your mother?"

She shook her head, still looking at him solemnly.

"Not one."

"And why do they want to marry you to Dan?"

"Because he's hot for my sake," she answered, coloring and looking fierce.

Jeffray walked on for a while in silence, his horse's bridle over his arm. Peter Gladden had hinted at mysteries with regard to the forest-folk, and confessed that no one knew how the Grimshaws came by their money. Could Bess have been stolen away as a child in gypsy fashion? Were her memories of the sea, the great ship, and the rest mere dawn dreams or the dim evidences of her origin? He glanced at her as she swung along at his side, her strong chin up, her keen eyes watching the darkening woods. He had never seen a Sussex wench bear herself like Mistress Bess.

"Bess," he said, suddenly.

Her eyes flashed round to him.

"There is something about you that makes me believe that you are not of the Grimshaw stock."

"Ah—"

"You look as though you had been born to be a great lady, and not Mother Ursula's niece."

By the light in Bess's eyes and the softness about her mouth, the innocent flattery seemed very sweet to her.

"Do you know what made me tell you all this, Mr. Jeffray?" she asked.

"No—"

"Because you are one of the great folk—and because I—am nothing."

Jeffray missed her meaning for the moment, and then caught a subtle something in the girl's eyes that made him hold his breath.

"God knows, Bess," he said, "whether you are a Grimshaw or no. I have as much honor for you as though you were my sister."

She colored and looked a little peevish about the mouth.

"Thank you, Mr. Jeffray," she answered.

They had come out upon the heath that smiled in the evening light. The deep azure of the east curved up beyond. The woods stood a rare purple below them, and a few plover were flapping and wailing over the moor.

"Bess," said the man, looking in her face.

She glanced at him and waited.

“You will count me your friend?”

“Ah—I have done so—already.”

“And I want to talk with you again.”

“I can be by the abbey.”

“On Monday—about four?”

“Yes. I can be there.”

They stood looking at each other in silence, as though there were some regret in either heart that the sun had sunk below the hills. It was growing dusk apace. Richard fumbled with his bridle and made as though to go. They were standing quite close to each other in the dusk, Bess’s eyes fixed upon Jeffray’s face, her lips half parted as though she were about to speak.

“I have not told you my dream,” she said, with a little laugh.

“St. Agnes’s dream?”

“Yes. I will tell it to you on Monday.”

Jeffray held out his hand to her. She was stooping a little, and her look suggested that she would have liked Richard to kiss her. The man remembered Miss Jilian Hardacre of a sudden, and he gazed at Bess as though some intangible barrier were between them.

“Good-night.”

“Good-night, Bess. I will think of you—till next time.”

XVI

The Lady Letitia, who was preparing for her departure from Rodenham, treated her nephew very courteously, and with a species of pitying kindness that suggested how profound and melancholy her forebodings were as to the future. She had received the news of the betrothal from Richard with unruffled dignity, showing neither malice nor irritation, and even deigning to wish her nephew a happy and prosperous marriage.

"Ah, mon cher Richard," she said, sitting very stiff and straight on her brocaded fauteuil before the fire, "since I am the beaten party you must permit me to march out of Rodenham with the honors of war. I have been holding out for your liberty, sir, for you are young yet, Richard, nor have you seen a great deal of the world. There, sir, don't shake your head at me; I will cease croaking. May you and your sweet Jilian be happy."

The old lady appeared quite affected, and Jeffray bowed to her and kissed her hand.

"I trust that there is no ill-feeling left between us, madam," he said.

Aunt Letitia remembered her nephew's loan, and declared that she had never been out of temper with Richard personally.

"You are one of those sweet fellows, nephew," she explained, "who need defending against their own generosity. Your honor is a sensitive and untarnished virtue, sir, nor have you learned what the world is worth. And now, my dear Richard, may an old woman be permitted to give you some last fragments of advice?"

Jeffray, both amused and interested, expressed himself eager to be benefited by the Lady Letitia's wisdom.

"Well, sir," she said, settling herself in her chair, "in the first place, do not count too much on marriage. It is not always the honey-pot young people imagine. And if you find your wife a little gay, Richard, don't weep over it and make a misery of life, but be gay in turn. You will soon accustom yourself to being amused and satisfied by other women."

The old lady was as grave and solemn over her cynicisms as a bishop over the expounding of the creed. Jeffray was not a little surprised at receiving such strange and ominous advice.

"Frankly, madam," he said, "I must confess that I look for better things for Jilian and myself."

The Lady Letitia was stern as some ancient druidess.

"Do not hope for anything in this life, sir," she said; "take pleasure as it comes,

and make the most of it. Do not be deceived by sentimental notions of propriety, and do not count on the future, for our expectations generally turn out to be ridiculous. Drink the wine in the cup, sir, and don't plot for the morrow. And stick to your money, Richard; for whatever poets may say, money is the only sure friend in this world."

The Lady Letitia's philosophy was not vastly cheering to her nephew's spirit, but then the sordid truth is never welcome to the ardent soul of youth. He pitied her for the poverty of her sentiments, and yet felt uncomfortably conscious all the while that there was much shrewd wisdom in her words. His money, yes! Would Miss Jilian Hardacre have loved him if he had been without a penny? Would Sir Peter have waxed so amiable and hearty? Would the rough boors touch their hats to him and the farmers wax obsequious in his presence? Richard smiled somewhat sadly over these thoughts, like a man finding his creed light in the balance. Yet there was Dick Wilson, the rough knave whose tongue was clumsy. Jeffray believed in him. And Bess? Why should he think of Bess at such a moment? Bess Grimshaw was inclined to pout and quarrel with his wealth because—and Richard flushed at the conviction—because his gentility threw up a barrier between them. Jeffray had never contrasted Miss Jilian and the forest child in this bright light before.

The morning after his talk with Aunt Letitia, Jeffray walked in his garden and watched the spring flowers that were spearing through the brown earth in the borders. The snowdrops had melted away, and gaudy crocuses, purple and gold, blazed beyond the hedges of close-clipped box. Hyacinths were thrusting up, tulips spreading their stout leaves. On the lawns below the terrace daffodils were nodding in the wind, lighting the sombreness of the yews and cedars.

As Richard walked his gravel-paths, thinking of Bess and of her shrouded history, a short, sturdy figure in black appeared upon the terrace and came down the steps towards the garden. It was Dr. Sugg, the fat rector of Rodenham, whose red face shone forth with fiery solemnity under his powdered wig.

Dr. Barnabas Sugg was a favorite with the villagers. He could drink good beer, preach short sermons, and refrain from poking his amiable nose too parsonically into his parishoners' affairs. He was a good man, though no ascetic, a round and rich-voiced gentleman, who was ready to put his hand into his pocket on occasions, and to give comfort to such as came to see him in his stuffy and smoke-haunted little parlor. Dr. Sugg was a high authority with the women. Had he not "churched" them and baptized their babies? Who could handle an erring wench and her lad so well, or persuade them to satisfy the prejudices of society? Who could sit and listen more good-naturedly to the small woes of the rough cottagers? The rector was no fire-fly, no sweating, shrieking Jonah, making hell lurid to the frightened oafs and wenches. A very human rogue, he lived his life among the rustics, worked with them, ay, swore at them when the occasion called for unshrinking eloquence. As for Mr. Wesley and his preachers, they had made no conquests in the rector's kingdom. More than one gospeller had sampled the bottom of the village pond.

Dr. Sugg approached Jeffray with an expression of unusual solemnity that morning, while the peacocks strutted in sapphire and gold and the white pigeons coquetted on the columbary roof.

"Good-morning, sir. I hope the Lady Letitia is well?"

Jeffray answered for his aunt's health and shook the parson by the hand. They boasted a mutual liking for each other, for though poor Sugg did not live the life of a St. Francis, he was a veritable mine of culture and erudition when compared with the squirearchs of the Sussex weald.

"Well, sir, I am not a bird of happy omen."

The rector blew his nose and flapped his scarlet handkerchief in the air.

"What evil tidings am I to hear?" asked Jeffray, smiling.

"Just this, sir, that the small-pox is said to be in Rodenham."

"The small-pox, Sugg!"

"A bad business, Mr. Richard, for we have been free of the plague these many years. I refer to the plague, sir, and not to the Methodists."

"How was it brought into the village?"

"By a peddler fellow from Lewes, I have heard. He had an attic at the Wheat Sheaf for a night, and George Gogg's girl, Kate, has sickened with what Surgeon Stott says is the yellow-pox, and I suppose he knows. Where it will end, sir, God only can tell."

Richard was no coward, but he looked grave enough over Dr. Sugg's tidings. He knew that the disease was Death's right-hand man in England, and that there were more folk who were scarred than there were folk who had gone free. High and low dreaded the scourge; the toper went white over his punch-bowl; madam in her perfumed boudoir shivered at the thought of the marring of her face.

"What is being done?" he asked, quietly.

"Done, sir; what can be done? I don't suppose there are five souls in the village who have ever been inoculated. I trust, Mr. Richard, that you are one of them."

"I followed Lady Montague's example—before I went abroad."

"Then you should be safe, sir. But those cottagers yonder would breed the pest as a dunghill breeds flies. Then there is my poor Mary. If it spreads, sir, she'll take it as she takes everything—mumps, measles, and the ague. Good God, Mr. Richard, I lost my wife by the small-pox! What should I do if I lost my girl?"

The rector's voluminous voice quavered with honest feeling. He blew his nose vigorously, blinked his eyes, and looked at Jeffray with lugubrious eagerness. Richard was touched by the old man's distress. Poor Mary Sugg; her plain face could not bear further detractions from its beauty.

"Why not take her away?" he asked.

A mild frown spread itself across the rector's forehead. He stared into the

distance and shook his head.

"The girl might go," he observed, slowly, "and yet I don't think it is right lest she might carry the pest with her. No, sir, I don't think it would be honest. As for me, Mr. Jeffray, I have no intention of turning tail. What would the poor folk think of their spiritual father if he tucked up his gown and scuttled directly the devil came down on them in the shape of a damnable disease?"

There was a look of blunt heroism on Dr. Sugg's commonplace old countenance that refreshed Jeffray's spirit of revolt against the Lady Letitia's cynicism.

"You are right, sir," he said. "I respect you for your sense of duty. The priory is a safer place than the rectory. Let Mary come up here to-morrow. Of course I shall forbid my servants going down into the village."

Dr. Sugg appeared grateful and comforted. He sniffed, and shook Jeffray's hand with unction.

"Thank you, sir," he said, "I thank you from my heart. And shall you remain at Rodenham yourself?"

Richard smiled.

"I have no intention of running away," he answered, "since I may be of some use if the plague spreads. What are they doing down at the Wheat Sheaf? There is the old pest-house down by the brook, is there not?"

The rector sighed and shook his head.

"George Gogg won't let his daughter be moved, sir," he said, "in spite of Surgeon Stott's fuming. As for the pest-house, the roof's half in, and Farmer Summers has been keeping his cattle in it. It ain't fit for use."

Richard took the responsibility to himself.

"I am afraid the fault is mine," he said; "I ought to have had the place kept in repair. Well, send Mary and her boxes up to-morrow. We will take her in till the danger is over."

Richard rode over to Hardacre that same afternoon and found his betrothed in the garden, a coquettish straw hat on her auburn head, the blue ribbons tied in a bow under her chin. Miss Hardacre carried a basket and a rake, and looked as rustic as a somewhat gorgeous blue gown and green hoop would suffer. Miss Jilian's gowns were legion, and it appeared as though she had one for each day of the month. They were part of the munitions of war, and Sir Peter flattered himself that now Mr. Richard had surrendered, he would no longer receive such outrageously long bills from the smart millinery establishment at Tunbridge Wells.

Richard made his betrothed a very fine bow, and was permitted to kiss the hand upon whose third finger shone the diamonds and rubies he had given her.

"La, Richard," quoth Miss Jilian, looking coy, "you have caught me in my oldest clothes, sir. You must remember that I have my housewifely duties. Sir Peter never troubles his head about the garden, and I have to see that the rascals weed the

paths.”

Mr. Richard declared that he admired a woman who was thoroughly domesticated.

“But really, Jilian,” he said, innocently, “your old clothes look very handsome. May I carry the basket for you?”

Miss Hardacre simpered, looked at her little feet, and blushed. She took care to be very coy and quaint with Richard, tricked out with charming affectations of simplicity, altogether a pretty pastoral of the cream and rose bloom order. No unspoiled youth would ever have fancied that many a male arm had circled that slim waist, or that sundry and several gallants had tasted those cherry lips.

“I hope you like pretty clothes, Richard,” she said, archly, handing him the basket, and wafting odors of lavender and of violet from her laced bosom like a living flower.

“Indeed, Jilian, I am proud to see you look so gay.”

“La, sir, I shall be a terrible expense to you, I am sure. What will you give me to dress myself on? Twenty pounds, eh, cousin?”

“Just as much as you like, Jilian.”

“Oh, Richard, how generous you are!”

“Am I?”

“You will be spoiling me, sir. But I do love pretty clothes, Richard, and scarves and perfumes and jewelry. Is it vanity, sir?”

“Very natural vanity,” quoth Mr. Richard, smiling, yet looking a little thoughtful.

Miss Hardacre glanced at him and arched her brows.

“There, you are teasing me, Richard,” she said; “I am sure you are.”

“I, laughing at you, Jilian?”

“Now you are frowning, to be sure. Is ought amiss with you, mon cher? You looked quite troubled and absent. Does my silly chatter tire you? I am such a gay, thoughtless little thing, and you, sir, are so terribly clever. Oh, I do hope I shall make you happy!”

Jeffray, angry with himself for the rebellious thoughts that were in his heart, pressed Miss Hardacre’s hand, and poured a pretty speech or two into her ear.

“I am a little troubled, Jilian,” he confessed. “Dr. Sugg told me this morning that there is a case of small-pox in Rodenham.”

Miss Jilian’s mouth gaped a little and her eyes hardened.

“Oh, Richard, how terrible!”

“Yes—terrible.”

She had shrunk almost imperceptibly away from him.

“I hope you have not been in any of those horrid cottages, Richard? The wretched people are so dirty and careless. Oh, the thought of the plague always terrifies me.”

Jeffray glanced at her gravely and with slight surprise. Miss Hardacre’s expression was one of petulant impatience.

“It will be a terrible thing, Jilian,” he said, “if the villagers are stricken down. The poor people are so ignorant that they cannot help themselves.”

“La, Richard, it will be their own fault, the silly, dirty wretches. Let me implore you not to go into Rodenham village.”

“I am not afraid,” quoth Mr. Richard, quietly.

“But you must think of me, sir. I do not want to be disfigured for life. Sir Peter would never let me be inoculated—or whatever they call it. He always said it was a nasty piece of nonsense.”

Richard hung his head a little, and noticed that Miss Hardacre still held her perfumed person at some slight distance from him.

“But, Jilian,” he said, “if the poor folk are ill I must try to do something to help them.”

The sweet angel showed further symptoms of impatience, even of temper. She carried her head very haughtily, and looked with some imperiousness at her betrothed.

“I suppose my wishes are of no account, Richard?”

“Jilian!”

“Oh yes, sir, it will be very nice for you to come and make love to me after you have been sitting in some dirty, festering hovel! Really, Richard, you must consider your position and my wishes. I suppose I have more claim upon your consideration than some frowsy cottage woman, eh?”

Miss Hardacre appeared in peril of tears, and Richard was moved to appease her with promises as best he could. Being a sensitive and somewhat diffident youth, he supposed himself wholly at fault in so delicate a matter, and apologized to his betrothed for seeming so careless of her health and happiness. After much sentimental persuasion Miss Hardacre deigned to smile and to receive him again into favor, ordering him, however, on pain of her extreme displeasure not to contaminate his person in the thatched hovels of Rodenham.

XVII

Remembering that Mary Sugg was to appear at the priory with her boxes the following morning, Richard conceived it advisable that he should enlighten the Lady Letitia as to Miss Sugg's advent. Not desiring to frighten the old lady, he announced to her after supper, with an air of quiet unconcern, that there was a reputed case of small-pox in the village and that he had offered his hospitality to Mary Sugg, who was very susceptible to fever. The Lady Letitia received the news with rampant astonishment, and fell straightway to abusing her nephew for dreaming of introducing the parson's daughter into the house.

"You must be mad, Richard," she said, looking red and overheated, "to think of dragging the girl up here. Precious little consideration you show for your aunt's safety, sir! I suppose my susceptibility to fevers is not worthy of consideration."

Jeffray attempted to mollify the old lady by describing poor Dr. Sugg's anxiety, and by dilating on the unhealthy position of the rectory, with the church-pond close under its windows.

"Richard, you are an absolute booby," she persisted. "How can you have a young woman staying alone with you in the house, with no discreet gentlewoman to see to the proprieties? Not that I am a prude, Richard, but what will your estimable neighbors say?"

Jeffray appeared vexed and not a little impatient. Was the world full of ridiculous entanglements of etiquette and propriety, and were all women in the habit of flying into tempers whenever their personal comfort was threatened?

"Why, madam," he said, "I have known Mary Sugg since childhood, and surely she is not a young gentlewoman likely to be made the subject of scandal?"

"Scandal can blacken an archangel, nephew. You must not attempt the impossible in life unless, of course, you intend to be improper."

"Madam!"

"There, there; don't frown at me, Richard. Can you not see, sir, that you would expose yourself to the jeers and gossipings of your neighbors by indulging in this quixotic sort of kindness? Mary Sugg is ugly, but she is a woman, and ugly women, sir, are often very fascinating. I am surprised that Dr. Sugg consented to the proposal."

Richard's lips curled perceptibly.

"To be frank with you, madam," he retorted, "I think Dr. Sugg is a man of sentiment and of sense. He is concerned for his child's safety, and his confidence in my honor is a compliment to my house. Why, poor Mary and I used to make daisy chains together in the meadows when we were children, and I can remember

wanting her to ride my hobby-horse, and of course she couldn't," and Mr. Richard laughed and blushed at the reminiscence.

Aunt Letitia still regarded her nephew with a mournful and prophetic stare.

"My dear Richard," she said, "I am only attempting to defend you from your own foolhardiness. The house is yours, and of course you can rule it as you think fit. What would your neighbors say if Miss Jilian Hardacre came to live with you before the crowning festival of propriety?"

"That is no parallel, madam."

"Hey! Then, nephew, go and ask Miss Hardacre to consent to Parson Sugg's daughter taking up her abode with you. If she displays no objection, then, sir, my opinions are in the air."

Jeffray bowed to his aunt's personal prejudices none the less, and despatched a servant with a note to the rectory, desiring Dr. Sugg to postpone his daughter's visit for a few days, since the Lady Letitia had a great dread lest she should be exposed to infection.

Richard rode over to Hardacre that morning to discover that Miss Jilian by no means approved of his suggestion that Mary Sugg should take up her residence with him at the priory. She was surprised that Richard should even have imagined such a thing, Trifling as the matter appeared, Jeffray felt rebuffed and mortified. He had expected Jilian to give her immediate consent to the plan, and behold, she seemed every wit as shocked as the Lady Letitia. What had come to the women? Had poor Mary Sugg been some lovely creature with pink cheeks and irreligious eyes, then there might have been some reason for this pother.

"I am sorry if I have offended you, Jilian," he said, a little haughtily, "but it was a mere matter of neighborly courtesy. I have known Mary Sugg from childhood."

Miss Hardacre proceeded to demonstrate that she possessed a very decided will of her own, and that even a purring, kittenish creature had claws.

"Richard, you are most unreasonable," she argued, "and I am sure the Lady Letitia advised you very sensibly. Why, the girl may be sickening already. You might catch it from her—and give the disease to me."

Jeffray made her a polite bow.

"I ask your pardon," he retorted; "it is plain to me that I have not considered the question selfishly enough. I will see Dr. Sugg and explain the situation."

"You need not tell the man that I objected, Richard."

"Not?"

"La, sir, the responsibility is yours, is it not? What have I to do with Mary Sugg?"

It may easily be conjectured that the parson's daughter did not take up her abode at Rodenham priory, and that Jeffray surrendered to Miss Hardacre's prejudices. He rode home in rather a sulky mood that day, meditating on the fact that in betrothing

himself to her he appeared to have taken most baffling responsibilities upon his conscience.

Richard did not tell Jilian of his tryst at Holy Cross with Bess of the Woods. He conceived that there was no shame in the adventure, since the girl was in trouble and needed the counsel of a friend. Silent as to his purpose, Richard rode to Hardacre that Monday, and found Miss Hardacre vaporish and out of humor with the world. She was cross; nor did she attempt to hide her petulance, expecting the lad to sympathize with her over the shortcomings of her maid and Sir Peter's stinginess in the matter of pin-money. Richard, blushing and looking a little uncomfortable, offered her guineas out of his own purse. Jilian's eyes glittered at the suggestion. She did not refuse the favor, and showed no delicate dislike to taking Richard's money.

Jeffray excused himself early, and rode through the chase and over the heath towards Pevensel. The sky was gray and sullen, cloud masses moving fast over the waving woods, and no sunlight splashing upon the greens and purples of the forest. Dead leaves whirled and danced in the glades; there was much swaying of pine-tops against the hungry sky.

He rode down through the woods, past the Calvary in the meadows, and came towards Holy Cross asleep amid the green. Moving amid the broken walls and arches he saw the girl spring down from the recess of a window, a gray cloak and hood upon her head and shoulders. She unbuckled the cloak and threw it aside as she came towards Jeffray over the grass, her black hair gleaming almost with a purplish lustre, her face aglow, her eyes shining. Jeffray had dismounted and thrown his bridle over the bough of a stunted thorn. He turned towards Bess with a curious shyness and a sense of rapid beating at the heart.

"Am I late?" he asked her.

She laughed, showing the regular whiteness of her teeth, the lustre in her eyes increasing.

"I had to run from the hamlet," she said, standing a little apart from him with her hands over her heart. "They have been bullying me again; it was yesterday, but the pistols kept them off. Mother Ursula is for me—now."

Richard was watching her with an instinctive delight in the splendid aliveness of her beauty. There was something inevitable about her, a passionate naturalness that made Miss Jilian seem a tangle of affectations. Bess spoke out, looked straight with her keen, blue eyes, and did not ogle, flirt, or simper.

"I am sorry that they will not leave you in peace," he said.

"Peace! There will be no peace for me unless I shoot Dan or run away or—"

She went red and looked troubled of a sudden, drooping her black lashes, and beating her hands together softly as though measuring out the rhythm of her thoughts. There was a wistfulness about her mouth that begot in Jeffray a great yearning to comfort her.

"Bess," he said.

She lifted her chin and looked at him, the light welling up again into her eyes.

"If Dan is for being a brute to you—"

"Yes?"

"Come to me at Rodenham. We can give you a home there—until—we see further into the future."

Richard had almost spoken of his marriage, but had strangled the confession before it had been uttered. Bess was looking at him steadily with much forethought in her eyes. Richard's chivalry did not wholly convince her; some self-conscious and intangible difficulty appeared to be hampering his mind.

"I thank you, Mr. Jeffray," she said, slowly, "but—"

"Well?"

"You would be ashamed of me in your great house."

Richard colored and looked at her appealingly.

"On my honor, Bess, no. Can you think such a thing of me?"

She smiled, half sadly, and still watched him with a species of instinctive incredulity.

"If they make me desperate," she began.

"You will let me help you?"

"Ah, but then—"

"Promise me, Bess. You saved my life once. And are you nothing to me?"

The words had slipped with sudden intensity off Richard's tongue. They seemed the very words that Bess had hoped to hear from him, and that she was hungry to take into her heart. She drooped her shoulders a little, her eyes shining, her hands hanging idly at her sides.

"Mr. Jeffray—"

"Yes?"

"I will come to you if—"

Richard's face had kindled in turn, and his eyes had caught the light in the woman's. He held his breath, and found himself trembling as he looked at her.

"On my honor, you shall be safe at Rodenham."

She laughed, and moved nearer to him, her mouth and chin upturned to his.

"I hate Dan," she said.

"Yes?"

"I did not dream of him on St. Agnes's night. It was of you, Mr. Jeffray. I dreamed that I was gathering herbs in the ruins here, and that I picked a great, red flower that turned to blood in my hand. Then—I saw you standing in the doorway yonder—looking at me, and then—I awoke."

Richard gazed at her. She was very near to him, so near that he almost felt her breath upon his mouth. He forgot Miss Jilian utterly for the moment in the near splendor of this woman's face.

"I shall pray to St. Agnes, Bess," he said.

She smiled at him wonderfully with her eyes.

"I almost blessed Dan, sir, for wounding you in the woods."

"Bess!"

"I have kept the cup out of which you drank, and put orpine in it, and it grows lustily. Listen, did you hear Dan's gun? He's down by the fish-ponds after wild duck."

She had started back from Jeffray with all the soft, glamourish light gone from her face, her eyes growing hard and fierce under her black brows. With a significant gesture she turned and climbed into one of the ruined windows, and, parting the ivy that hung in masses about the jambs, looked out over the grass-land towards the abbey pools. A man was standing under a willow with his back towards the ruins. He was busy recharging his gun, and watching his spaniel that was swimming out to recover the bird that had fallen into the water. Bess watched him a moment with her eyes sullen and full of hatred. Surely some devil must have persuaded the unconscious Dan to trudge down to the abbey ponds that evening.

Springing down again, she ran back to Jeffray, her red petticoat swinging about her slim, strong ankles.

"It is Dan," she said, in a whisper, looking hard at Richard.

"Confound the fellow!"

Bess's eyes gleamed sympathetically.

"You must go, Mr. Jeffray."

"Go?"

"If Dan found you with me—"

Richard's smooth face grew wondrous grim for the moment.

"I am not afraid of your cousin, Bess," he said.

"Ah, you do not know Dan; he has the temper of a devil."

Richard was looking at her very earnestly.

"Perhaps you are right, Bess," he answered. "There is no reason why we should betray our trysting-place to him. What shall you do?"

"Oh, I can hide and wait till Dan has gone. He will never suspect that I am here. And when—"

She hesitated, and swayed nearer to Richard as they walked towards his horse.

"When?" he echoed.

"Shall we meet here again?"

“Thursday.”

“Three days!”

“It cannot be before.”

She smiled mysteriously and looked at Richard with the same alluring light shining in her eyes. How red and mischievous her lips looked! Jeffray conceived a great thirst for them, but hung back as though his honor shackled him. They were both a little shy of each other, looking long into each other’s eyes and breathing rapidly. Then they heard Dan’s voice calling to his dog, and Jeffray, mounting his horse, smiled at the girl and rode out from the ruins. Bess stood watching him with her bosom rising and falling and her face aglow.

Richard overtook Dan Grimshaw at the ford, and gave him “good-day” as he splashed through the water. The forester’s ugly face clouded as he recognized Jeffray. He touched his fur cap surlily, and appeared puzzled to know what business the Squire of Rodenham had in Pevensel. Jeffray, gathering that Bess was safe, pricked up his horse and took the path through the woods.

XVIII

Shakespeare's Romeo lost his reason in a night, and, however illogical the intoxications of youth may seem, they are of finer gold than the cold-tempered alloys of age.

Jeffray rode through the woods that evening, and heard the birds singing in the thickets, and saw the gloom creeping up over the mysterious hills, the gray sky cracking in the west to let through the red and molten lava of the setting sun. Thrush challenged thrush on many a glimmering spire, blackbirds piped it mellowly, linnets twittered in the gorse. Soon the plaintive chiding of the wryneck would be heard amid the meadows and the thickets. The wild woods seemed full of sound, of all the joyous outpourings of life, the massed chantings of the forest choristers. The gorse glimmered, wind-flowers shivered in the shade, the cuckoo-flower was unfolding its finials of lilac and white. Overhead the great trees breathed and murmured, tossing their hands to the setting sun.

Jeffray's whole soul was filled with melancholy delight. Was not this black-haired Bess akin to all this beauty, this starting forth of colors, this uprushing of sound? The light in her eyes, surely it had set his soul on fire. And the sweet scent of her clothes, like hay on a June morning, should he forget it to the day of his death?

He slept but little that night, tossing to and fro—and thinking of Bess. Even when he slept he dreamed of her, and waking—seemed to catch her face looking out at him from the gloom. Ever and again, with a rallying of his loyalty to Jilian, he strove to put the thought of the girl out of his head. It was but the old battle betwixt nature and the sentimental but very jealous ordinances of civilization. On the one hand, romance pleaded, on the other, prosaic proprieties of life propounded the doctrine of peace and respectable monotony.

Richard came from his bedroom feeling feverish and heavy about the eyes next morning. It was but a just judgment on the physical part of him, he imagined, for the emotional debauch of yesterday. He ate his breakfast in solitude, staring morosely out of the window, and watching the clouds move across the sky. Depression had followed on exaltation, and he was moved to regard the passion of yesterday in a somewhat more stern and moral light. No, he would not meet Bess on Thursday. If she were in trouble she could come to him at Rodenham and he would help her. Heavens, if his escapade came to Miss Jilian's ears there would be excitement enough for him in the home of the Hardacres! He would go and see Jilian that very morning. Her presence would chasten him and enable him to realize more acutely the disloyalty of his attraction towards poor Bess.

Probably Miss Hardacre was puzzled by her betrothed's melancholy as they

walked on the terrace that day with Jilian's two spaniels playing about her feet. The lady's quick wits were soon at work to discover the meaning of her dear Richard's moodiness. Had she been oversharp with him concerning poor Mary Sugg? Jeffray smiled at her with genuine candor, and confessed that the parson's daughter had nothing to do with his depression. He was vexed with a headache; so much Miss Hardacre could cajole from him, and it was enough to enable her to be sympathetic.

"La, Richard," she confessed, regarding him very gravely, "you look quite feverish and ill. Would you like to lie down in the house? Quiet, Tib! Down Tobe! your master has a headache. Drat the dogs; how noisy they are, to be sure!"

Miss Hardacre flicked her handkerchief at the spaniels, who, imagining that the lady was challenging them to a game, yapped and growled with greater vigor.

"Deuce take the dogs!"

Richard had his hand to his head.

"Don't vex yourself, Jilian," he said, "it is nothing, I thank you."

"You look very white, Richard."

"It is the megrims—perhaps—"

Some sudden suspicion seemed to seize upon Miss Hardacre's heart. She looked at her betrothed keenly, with an anxious hardening of her eyes and mouth.

"Richard?"

"Yes, dear—"

"Have you been in Rodenham village?"

Jeffray stared at her questioningly.

"Not for a week," he said.

"Supposing it should be—Oh—horrible! My head is in a whirl."

Jeffray flushed up as though Jilian had suddenly discovered all that was in his heart.

"I do not understand you, Jilian," he said.

Miss Hardacre had drawn a little apart from Jeffray, and was waving her scented handkerchief under her nose.

"Supposing you are sickening for the small-pox, Richard," she said.

"Jilian!"

"You look very feverish. No, please do not come too near me."

"Am I so terrible to look at?"

"Oh, Richard, I am sure I am about to faint."

Jeffray had grown pale of a sudden. Was there anything prophetic in Miss Hardacre's words, or was it his own fancy that made him feel chilly about the heart? He drew away from his betrothed, put his hand to his forehead, and felt that it was hot and moist.

He glanced at Jilian, who was walking unsteadily with her eyes half closed, the spaniels still yapping at her heels.

"Certainly I feel feverish," he confessed; "shall I give you my arm, Jilian? No. Perhaps I had better keep away from you."

Miss Hardacre's face had gone an ashy yellow behind the blushes that still bloomed upon her cheeks.

"Richard," she said, "go home at once and send for Surgeon Stott, from Rookhurst. It is not safe for you to remain near me."

Jeffray was gazing at her searchingly, wondering how much she loved him since her first thoughts seemed for herself.

"I think you are right," he said, slowly.

Jilian still played with her handkerchief, and appeared tormented by the conflicting emotions in her heart. It was proper for her to display some tenderness towards her betrothed, yet she was in mortal fear of the disease that might be lurking in his very breath.

"Richard, mon cher, if anything should happen, I—I will come and nurse you."

Jeffray reddened and looked somewhat ashamed.

"I could not let you imperil yourself," he retorted, with much feeling.

Miss Hardacre wavered, and held out her hands to him pathetically. She was sorry for the lad, and yet her terror overcame her pity.

"Go home, Richard," she said. "No, you must not kiss me. It may be nothing but a fear, but—I am afraid of you to-day."

And Jeffray, feeling strangely humbled, bowed and left her on the terrace.

The sense of feverishness increased on Richard as he rode homeward through wild, alluring Pevensel. The blood was drumming in his brain; his eyes were hot, his mouth parched and dry with the March wind and the dust. Even the motion of his horse made him sweat, and there was a dull ache across his loins. How different his mood from that which had torched him through the wilds but yesterday!

The forest itself seemed to grow full of fantasies before him, like some weird etching of Albrecht Durer's. The trees towered, waxing grotesque and even threatening as they poured down in places upon the road. The mutterings of the wind were intensified in his ears, the lights and shadows of the landscape exaggerated. Continually he fancied that he saw a figure in a red cloak flitting amid the crowded trunks of the trees. The feverish thought haunted him that Bess was flying to Rodenham for fear of Dan. What if he had had the fever in his blood and had given it to the girl in the abbey yesterday? The thought of her proud and handsome face scarred by the ravages of disease made him shiver and feel cold at the heart. Poor Jilian also might take it from him, nor did he wonder that she had shrunk away in fear.

Coming to the lowlands, and seeing the pasture lands and fields russet and green

under the blue, he uncovered his head and let the wind play about his forehead. The lodge gates were open, and even as Jeffray came up the road at a walk, Dr. Sugg's stout figure came out from the shadows of the yews that hid the drive. Richard rallied himself and steadied his wits as the rector halted in the road to speak to him. They had not met since Jeffray had excused himself by letter from receiving Mary Sugg at the priory.

"Good-day, Mr. Richard."

"Good-day, sir, I want to speak with you."

The parson was looking at Jeffray curiously, screwing up his eyes, wrinkles running across his forehead.

"What news have you for me?"

"Bad, sir, bad. George Gogg's wench has the small-pox to a certainty. Gogg's in bed himself. Old Sturtevant and two more have sickened."

Jeffray winced perceptibly, and gazed with some uneasiness at the rector.

"I am sorry about Mary," he said.

"Don't mention it, sir," quoth Dr. Sugg, stolidly.

"The Lady Letitia is nervous, very nervous, sir, and, to be frank with you, Miss Hardacre, my betrothed—"

The rector's eyes twinkled as he broke in upon Jeffray's apologies.

"Do not vex yourself, sir," he said. "I understand the matter perfectly. May I remark, Mr. Jeffray, that you look far from well yourself."

Richard stared in Dr. Sugg's red and kindly face.

"I—sir?"

"You look feverish—uncommon feverish. I hope you are not going to be bedded, sir. How are you feeling, eh?"

Richard forced a smile and wiped his forehead.

"Rather hot in the head, Sugg, and stiff about the back."

The rector's air of concern deepened. He screwed up his eyes still more and cocked his broad head seriously at Jeffray.

"Shall I tell Stott to ride up to the priory to-morrow, sir? He will be in the village."

"I am much obliged to you, doctor."

"Forewarned—forearmed, Mr. Jeffray. I trust, though, it is nothing serious with you. My girl Mary's all right as yet. I'll send Stott on to you to-morrow."

XIX

The Lady Letitia sat before the fire in the red parlor with a copy of the *Gentleman's Magazine* lying upon her lap. In the fender lay a bundle of feathers which the old lady was burning, having heard that the smoke therefrom was very efficacious in the preventing of fevers. Very cross and querulous she felt, and very cross she looked as she sat there burning the feathers and taking snuff from time to time, for the Lady Letitia was not a woman fitted to play the Dorcas or to take pleasure in ministering to the sick. Pain, disease, and poverty were things she dreaded and detested as vulgar intruders, marring the polite gayeties of life.

Hence she had shown no little impatience that morning when Peter Gladden had announced the fact that Mr. Richard was indisposed and would keep his bed. Gladden, bearer of cocoa and shaving-water, had found his master looking flushed and feverish, with dry lips and heavy eyes, and complaining of sickness and headache and sharp pain in the small of the back. Jeffray would not have the curtains drawn, for the sunlight seemed to intensify his feeling of nausea and the feverish throbbing in his head. He had ordered Gladden to send a groom down to Rodenham village to insure Surgeon Stott's calling that day.

As the Lady Letitia sat burning her feathers and muttering to herself in the red parlor, Peter Gladden's black-coated figure appeared in the doorway, his colorless face imperturbable as ever. The dowager glanced at the butler irritably over her shoulder, and asked him, sharply, what he wanted.

"Surgeon Stott, madam, requests the honor of speaking with you."

"What's the man want with me, Gladden?"

"It concerns Mr. Richard, madam."

The Lady Letitia scowled—and straightened her cap.

"Tell the man to come in, Gladden," she said. "Tell him to remain by the door. Of course his clothes reek of the small-pox."

The butler disappeared with a cynical twinkle in his eyes, and turned to where Mr. Stott was standing with his broad back to the hall fire. The surgeon and Mr. Gladden looked at each other with a certain comical flash of sympathy. Stott was a florid and well-complexioned person who wore a blue coat, a scratch wig, brown riding-breeches, and top-boots. The surgeon did not cultivate the town graces and delicacies of "the faculty." He had to ride through mud and ford streams, dive into hovels where gowns and periwigs would have been a nuisance and the pomposities of the profession more than ridiculous.

The dowager scrutinized Mr. Stott from top to toe with an air of aristocratic insolence as he bowed himself into the red parlor. She scanned his muddy boots,

noticed the bourgeois redness of his face and hands, and desired him, with some hauteur, not to approach too near her chair. Surgeon Stott's humorous mouth twitched expressively. He inhaled the odors of lavender and burned feathers, and seated himself, with the amiable docility of a philosopher, near the door.

The Lady Letitia had cocked her beak at him commandingly.

"Well, sir, what is your business with me?"

"I have come to speak to you about Mr. Jeffray, madam."

The dowager caught a solemn twinkle in the man's vulgar, blue eyes; the suave curve of his clean-shaven mouth seemed to suggest that the surgeon possessed a strong sense of humor. The Lady Letitia's dignity increased. She did not exist to amuse muddy apothecaries peddling boluses in provincial towns. She, to whom the great Dr. Billinghurst, of London, would listen for an hour, was not to be smiled at by this rustic blue-bottle.

"You are the apothecary from Rookhurst, sir, I believe?"

"Surgeon, madam."

"A member of the company?"

"I claim that distinction."

The Lady Letitia's face expressed surprise. Her manner suggested to Mr. Stott that he had not impressed her with any great degree of authority in the art of healing.

"We thought we would have your opinion, sir," she explained, "as a temporary satisfaction. Should my nephew show signs of serious indisposition, we shall send for a responsible physician to attend him. Now, sir, will you oblige me with your candid opinion as to Mr. Jeffray's health."

Surgeon Stott was watching the old lady with grim curiosity. She was a distinct study in aristocratic arrogance with her air of condescending patronage, and her detestable old face painted and powdered to the very complexion of her vanity.

"If you care to consider my opinion, madam—"

"Well, sir?"

"I may state that Mr. Jeffray is sickening with the small-pox."

"What!"

The Lady Letitia perked up like a frightened hen, much to Surgeon Stott's inward satisfaction.

"That is my diagnosis, madam," he said. "I have bled Mr. Jeffray of ten ounces, and ordered him to be sponged with tepid water. One of the grooms is to ride back with me to Rookhurst for the physic. There will be a fever mixture and a bolus. Can I oblige your ladyship in any way?"

The dowager plied her handkerchief and strove to recover her disturbed dignity. Richard with the small-pox! How deplorably vexatious, not to say—inconsiderate—

her nephew's illness appeared! Meanwhile, Surgeon Stott had risen. He bowed to the dowager till his tight riding-breeches creaked, and seemed not a little amused at the old lady's fluster.

"With your kind permission, madam," he said, "I will call again to-morrow. Your ladyship may even need my humble attention."

The dowager bridled at the insinuation.

"Call by all means," she retorted, "but I shall have transferred myself to some locality where I can obtain trustworthy advice."

When Mr. Stott had gone, the dowager pealed the bell, and almost squealed at Gladden when his emotionless face appeared at the door.

"Send Parsons to me at once, and order Betsy to pack my boxes."

Peter Gladden bowed, smiled curiously, and departed. At the end of three minutes Parsons, the Lady Letitia's confidential man, a thin, circumspect individual with a prim mouth and a long nose, marched in to receive his mistress's orders.

"Parsons, we must leave Rodenham at once. Have the coach ready by one, and order Betsy to pack my trunks. Can we make Tunbridge Wells before dusk?"

Parsons bowed, and apologized for the roads—in that they had the bad taste to be execrably heavy.

"Drat the roads," quoth the old lady, in a fine fume. "No decent folk should venture into this abominable wilderness. Where can we bait for the night, Parsons?"

"We can find a good inn at Grinstead, madam."

"Let it be Grinstead, then. And Parsons, see that Gladden and the servants have their vails; a guinea will do for the wenches; here is my purse. And see to your pistols, Parsons; this beggarly slough is full of smugglers and footpads."

The suave and obsequious Parsons left to prepare his mistress's departure. The Lady Letitia, still unduly distressed, hobbled up to her bedroom by the back stairs, so that she should not pass her nephew's door. The guineas Richard had loaned to her were sewn up in a leather bag under her hoop. Miss Betsy was flinging gowns, petticoats, and underclothing into the trunks, being no less eager than the Lady Letitia to flee the house that the pest had entered. The room was littered with scarves, pomade-boxes, pins, ribbons, jewelry, gowns, stockings, and shoes. The dowager stood leaning on her stick, scolding and directing the girl as she hurried the multifarious articles into the trunks.

The old lady did not attempt to conceal either her nervousness or her annoyance from her maid.

"Drat the small-pox," she said, with feeling; "one would think that the devil had the sowing of the pest. Confusion, wench, what are you doing with that green silk sack? Don't crush it up as though it were dirty linen. Yes. I have told Parsons that we must make Grinstead before dusk."

Miss Betsy sat back on her heels as she knelt beside the largest trunk, and

glanced round at the hundred and one articles littering the floor.

“Poor Mr. Richard!” she said.

“What’s that you’re saying?”

“It does seem mean, ma’am, that we should be running away and leaving him alone.”

“Betsy,” quoth the dowager, curtly, “you’re a fool.”

“La, ma’am!”

“What good can we do by staying here, hey? You should be grateful that I have the moral courage to go.”

Before she departed the Lady Letitia wrote an affectionate note to her nephew, addressing him as “Mon beau Richard, mon cher neveu,” praying for his speedy recovery, and explaining that nothing but the extreme delicacy of her health persuaded her to leave him at such a crisis. Shortly after noon the dowager’s coach rolled away from the priory porch, with Peter Gladden bowing stiffly on the threshold, and staring a contemptuous farewell at Mr. Parsons on the back seat, who was looking to his pistols. Richard, half delirious in his room above, heard the grinding of the wheels and the rattling of the harness. He understood dimly that his aunt was deserting him with his guineas under her petticoat. And thus the small-pox drove the old lady out of Rodenham, and the sick man was left to Peter Gladden and Surgeon Stott.

XX

It was on the night of Tuesday that Isaac came to Ursula's cottage and seated himself on the oak settle before the fire. Old Ursula was in the ingle-nook with a pile of stockings in her lap, Bess on a stool beside the fender, her hands clasped about her knees, her eyes full of the thought of Jeffray. She had opened the door to the patriarch, greeted him somewhat sullenly, and shot the bolts after him for fear that Dan should be lurking outside the cottage. Isaac Grimshaw's smooth face suggested that he was in the most sociable of moods. He persuaded his sister to brew a bowl of rum punch, and, drawing out a short pipe and a tobacco-box from the tail-pocket of his coat, sat smoking before the fire. Bess, on her stool, was watching the old man suspiciously, and wondering what thoughts were passing in his mind. She always distrusted Isaac's good-humor, and preferred a frown from him to a smile.

Isaac began to prattle on all manner of matters, poking fun at old Ursula and looking as simple and jolly an old fellow as ever sniffed the odors of lemon and rum, cloves and cinnamon. He talked of Rookhurst Fair, and promised to buy a bunch of ribbons for Ursula, and a pair of red shoes for her to wear on May-day.

Bess grew very mistrustful of the old man's mood as he sat there shaking his silvery hair in the firelight, thrusting out his lower lip, and watching her with his keen, gray eyes. She would take none of his punch, though he pressed her often, noticing that Ursula was growing drowsy after she had drunk of it more than once. She felt instinctively that there was something false in the old man's hilarity. Often Bess fancied that Isaac was listening for some sound he intended that she should not hear. She concealed her suspicions from him, humored his gayety, and kept her wits alert lest there might be treachery afoot against herself. Isaac still ladled out the punch, winking at Bess as old Ursula waxed sleepy in the ingle-nook. He began to tell the women of Rookhurst Fair in the old days, when he could handle a cudgel with any youngster in the country. His shrill yet melodious voice flowed on without ceasing, as though he were endeavoring to drown the silence with a perpetual plash of words.

"Ah, dame," he said, "I can remember when Jeremy brought ye your wedding-ribbons and a ring at Rookhurst. You were a merry bit of mutton then. Do you call to mind old Stumpy Job, the Jew who used to have his stall in the corner of the market before Surgeon Stott's door? It was John Stott in those days, and, deuce take me, he was a rough devil; he'd bleed you half dead and blister your back till there wasn't a sound bit of skin over your kidneys. Well, Stumpy Job, he was about the cleverest knave as ever I knew. Half the smugglers in the Channel had dealings with him, and if 'my lady' wanted French lace or silks, she had but to let Stumpy know,

and a pack load of finery would drop over the garden-wall one quiet night. Yes, Stumpy was a neat rogue, but too greedy on the main chance, and they stretched his neck for him at the end of it. They hanged him on Dardan Heath for shooting an exciseman, and he showed the white-feather terrible at the end. I did hear that he promised to pay 'em all a powerful lot of money if they'd let him run and cross the water. His guineas were buried somewhere down Chichester way, and they do say that a flash dame who kept an inn there had it, for Stumpy was always hot on the women."

Bess had been sitting motionless all through the old man's monologue, her brows contracted, and an expression of alertness on her face. Her eyes were fixed upon the door opening upon the stairs, though she cast rapid glances ever and again at Isaac's countenance shining in the firelight under his silvery hair. Ursula was half asleep in the ingle-nook, nodding her head mechanically over her brother's reminiscences. Bess had caught a vague and indefinite sound that had quickened her pulses and deepened her distrust. She rose up very quietly from her stool, yawned, and reached for the brass candlestick upon the mantle-shelf.

Old Isaac, wide-awake on the instant, turned on the settle and looked at her suspiciously.

"What's amiss, lass?" he asked her, with a smile.

Bess lit the candle, steadied herself, betraying nothing of the dread that was in her heart.

"I am tired, and it is growing late."

"Tut, tut, lass, stay with us a little longer. Have you listened too much to an old man's tales?"

Bess yawned behind her hand, laughed, and walked towards the stairs.

"Ursula will sit and listen to you, uncle," she said. "There is hot water in the kettle if you want more punch."

She opened the stair door, and, shutting it quickly after her, shot the bolt on the inside. Isaac had started up from the settle, and limped across the room with an impatient grin upon his face. Bess heard him try the door and go back balked to the fire when he found it bolted. Holding the candle above her head she climbed the stairs slowly, step by step, frowning when the bare boards creaked, and halting continually to listen. She had drawn one of Jeffray's pistols from her bosom, and the steel barrel quivered a little as her fingers strained nervously about the stock.

Coming to the narrow landing at the top of the stairs, she stood listening, with her head bent forward, the candle shaded behind her hand. The two doors that opened upon the landing were shut, and Bess knew not what their black panelling might hide. Putting her ear close to the door of her own bedroom, she heard the casement rattling from time to time, and a sound as of some one at work on the iron bars closing the window. The candle shook a little in her hand. Setting it down on an old chest by the wall, she gathered her courage, and, lifting the latch, threw the door

open at arm's-length.

Outlined against the dark square of the window, Bess saw the head and shoulders of a man. He appeared to be half kneeling on the window-ledge without, working at the clamps that held the iron bars in their sockets. The casement frame was open, and for the moment Bess could not see his face.

He looked up suddenly on hearing the door open, swore, and hung there staring at Bess as she stood in the doorway with the candle behind her. She had recognized Dan, and understood with a flash of fury why he was loosening the bars of the window. There was a short ladder leaning against the cottage wall under Dan's feet. He let himself half drop from the window-sill as Bess came forward into the room hiding her pistol behind her back.

"Dan, you devil—"

She stood, pointing at him, her face ablaze, her eyes hard and cruel. Dan was feeling the bar warily with his hand, grinning and showing his yellow fangs, and looking at Bess like a hungry animal.

"Let me in, wench," he said.

Bess eyed him and fingered her pistol.

"Let you in, Dan! The stair door's bolted and the bar is up. Come at me—if you can—you coward."

There was a sudden splintering of wood as the bar was forced in by the man's powerful arm. He lifted his chest to the sill, and hung there straining and panting, working with his knees and feet against the wall. Bess could hear Isaac beating upon the door that closed the staircase. She moved quite close to Dan, and pointed her pistol at his head.

"Stop, or I'll kill ye!"

Dan gave a great heave and brought his knees up on the sill. Bess fired at him on the instant, and sprang back towards the door. The ball whipped off the lobe of Dan's right ear, the charge blackening and scorching his face. The shock lost him his balance. Bess saw him clutch at the casement frame, and go tumbling down, tearing the lattice with him as he fell. Awed for the moment, she stepped to the window and saw Dan lying in a black heap under the ladder that had toppled down on him. From below came old Ursula's cries and Isaac's cursing. Bess heard the cottage door open. Footsteps came through the garden under the trees. Isaac's white head gleamed in the moonlight as he ran forward and pulled the ladder from off Dan's body.

Bess turned to the cupboard in the corner of the room, and took out the second pistol Jeffray had given her. She went to the window again and looked out. Isaac had his arms under Dan's shoulders; the old man was kneeling and supporting his son's body, questioning him in a shrill, fierce voice as to whether he was badly hurt. Dan was little the worse save for a strained back and a torn ear. He scrambled up stupidly with his hand to his head, and stood looking up at Bess with savage spite in

his eyes.

"Thank the Lord, you she-dog," shouted old Isaac, his mouth working like the mouth of a man in pain, "the shot went wide of the lad's head."

Ursula, who had hobbled round, laid a hand on her brother's shoulder.

"Don't vex the girl further, Isaac," she whimpered.

Old Grimshaw shook her hand away, and cursed Bess to her face.

"By Heaven, you shall be tamed," he said. "Dan shall have you yet. Who gave you your shooting-irons, eh? I'll come round and make 'em safe to-morrow; you shall give 'em up, or I'll know why. Come, lad, pick up the ladder; we must see to your burned face."

They took the ladder between them, and marched away in the moonlight towards the hamlet. Ursula, who had barred the door again, came up to Bess in her bedroom, querulous and frightened. The girl told her the whole truth, how Dan had loosened the window-bars in their sockets while Isaac was talking to them in the kitchen. Ursula shook her head over the treachery, cursed Dan, and tottered off to bed.

Bess did not sleep that night, but, wrapping herself in her cloak, lay down to think. The moon was sinking towards the west, flooding the little room with silvery light, and making the girl's face seem white and wistful in the gloom. From the bed, Bess could see the towering woods melting away into dreamlands of mist and magic. All Pevensel seemed asleep, with no wind stirring. The pines about the cottage stood black and motionless under the stars. From below Bess could catch the quiet laughter of the stream in the valley running under the moonlight amid the trees.

She lay there a long while in a stupor of fierce and rebellious thought, the sense of her own loneliness deepened by the vast silence of the night. Despite her woman's fury against Dan, she shivered and felt cold, and even the shadowy magic of Pevensel seemed full of treachery and whispering horror. Not till another morrow would she meet Jeffray at Holy Cross, and she had much to fear from Isaac and his son.

As she lay on the bed with the moonlight flooding in, the sudden, shrill cry of a bird taken by a weasel in the woods trembled up out of the silence. Bess shuddered and started up from the pillow. She caught a warning in this wild thing's cry, an omen vouchsafed to her by savage Pevensel. White and cold about the lips, she rose up suddenly, went to the window, and looked out. She could see the broken lattice lying at the foot of the wall, and even imagined that the stains of Dan's blood were visible upon the grass. How she hated and feared the man! The thought of his coarse face and great, heavy hands strengthened her in her passion to escape from the forest.

Turning back into the room, she put one of Jeffray's pistols into her bosom and hid the other under the mattress of the bed. Then she buckled on her best shoes,

hooked up her cloak, and drew the hood forward over her face. Very softly she crept down the stairs into the kitchen, and listened for a moment outside Ursula's door to discover whether the old woman was awake or no. She heard the sound of deep and regular breathing within, and knew that the dame was fast asleep. The embers of the fire still glowed on the hearth, and the kitchen reeked of Isaac's tobacco. Creeping to the cottage door, she took down the bar noiselessly and shot back the bolts. Without the world seemed built up of magic, the moonlight flooding down upon the orchards and the woods. Bess shut the door gently, passed through the garden, and half ran across the open grass-land betwixt the cottage and the forest. She took the path leading up towards the heath about the Beacon Rock, and, gathering her cloak round her, fled away into the moon-streaked shadows.

It was early in the morning when Bess, who had asked her way of a laborer trimming the hedges by the road, came down from the high lands and saw Rodenham village with its red-and-white walls and thatched roofs in the valley. The smoke ascended from the chimneys in purple threads towards the blue, and a haze of gold hung over the woods and meadows, dimming the grand outlines of the distant downs. Bess saw the priory standing apart from the village amid the green billows of its park and the shadows of its mighty trees. The place looked very solemn and stately in the morning light, and almost forbidding to her in the autocracy of its solitude. She felt much like a beggar-woman as she slipped through the lodge gates and passed under the yews that stood there in massive and shadowy repose.

Iron gates swinging on stone pillars, each topped with a carved dragon, opened upon the terrace and garden. Bess pushed in and passed on bravely towards the Tudor porch, with its massive timbers, and roses and acorns carved in oak. Each tall window of the house seemed to stare at her superciliously, and the peacocks strutting on the terrace in the sun were like so many gaudy lackeys ruffling it about her. She climbed the three steps, and laid her hand on the iron bell-pull with a fluttering feeling at the heart. How the rusty thing creaked and resisted her! Then the rod slid so vigorously in its rusty sockets that the loud and insistent clangor of the bell made Bess fancy that the whole house was startled by her boldness.

An elderly woman in a mob-cap, her hair in curl papers, opened the door to Bess. The servants had fled the house, and Peter Gladden and his wife alone remained to minister to Jeffray in his sickness. The butler was sitting by the open window of Richard's room, watching for Surgeon Stott and listening to his master's delirious mutterings. It was Mrs. Barbara who opened the door to Bess that morning and stared at her in some surprise. Mrs. Barbara was a sour-tempered person, very sure of her own importance; nor had the flight of her maids tended to sanctify her resentful soul.

"Well, what d'you want, eh?"

Bess colored under the woman's curious stare. There was nothing suggestive of courtesy in Mrs. Gladden's manner.

“I have come to see Mr. Jeffray.”

The woman’s eyes studied the girl’s person with impertinent composure. She looked at Bess’s handsome face, considered her clothes, and prepared for circumspection in her dealings with so gypsyish a wench.

“What’s your name?”

“Bess Grimshaw.”

“Grimshaw?”

“Yes.”

“Where do you come from?”

“Pevensel.”

“And what’s your business?”

Bess’s eyes smouldered at such cross-questioning. Mrs. Barbara’s attitude was brusque and insolent. She was in the habit of bullying the girls under her, and, like an underling intrusted with some authority, she made the most of it, and mistook impertinence for dignity.

“I want to see Mr. Jeffray,” quoth Bess, quietly.

“You do, do you?”

“Mr. Jeffray knows my name.”

Mrs. Barbara’s brows contracted, and there was an unpleasant glint in her brown eyes.

“And what may your business with the squire be?” she asked, suspiciously.

Bess reddened and began to look fierce.

“My business is not yours,” she retorted. “If you will tell Mr. Jeffray that I am here he will see me.”

Mrs. Gladden drew herself up, and expressed amazement that a gypsy wench should give herself such mighty airs.

“Highty-tighty!” she exclaimed, with elevated nostrils; “are we on visiting terms at the priory? You Grimshaws may have broken Mr. Jeffray’s head, but you are not of the quality the young master receives. Come. What d’you want? Money, eh? The back door is the place for beggars.”

Bess’s natural dignity appeared to lift her out of the squabble and to set her immeasurably above Mrs. Barbara’s papered head.

“I have come to speak with Mr. Jeffray, that is all,” she said, looking very haughtily into the elder woman’s face. “I have not come to beg or to wrangle with Mr. Jeffray’s servants.”

“Servants! The impertinence of it!”

“I will bide here—till you have taken my name to your master, madam.”

Mrs. Gladden’s nose suggested the presence of some very unpleasant odor. She

thrust her hands under her dirty apron, and strove to look as portentous as her fat and frowsy person would permit.

“Don’t let me have any more of your impertinence, young woman,” she said. “Mr. Jeffray’s in bed with the small-pox. There’s the long and short of it. I reckon you had better be moving.”

Bess’s face had softened of a sudden, and there was a pathetic drooping of her mouth.

“Mr. Jeffray—ill!”

“Didn’t I say so, saucy! The poor young gentleman’s quite out of his senses. Here is Mr. Gladden coming down the stairs; he’s good at persuading them as are not wanted, to go.”

But Bess did not wait for Peter Gladden’s advent. She turned away suddenly from Mrs. Barbara, and went down out of the porch with a look as of pain upon her face.

XXI

Bess passed back in her red cloak between the cedars with Mrs. Barbara's taunts still sounding in her ears. She felt benumbed at heart, baffled and very miserable, not knowing whither to turn for shelter now that Jeffray's promise could have no fulfilment. Mrs. Gladden's insolence had not hurt her so much as the thought of Richard stricken down so suddenly by this disease. Had but two days passed since he had talked with her in Holy Cross, and gazed with such earnestness upon her face? As she crossed the park Bess looked back wistfully at the great house where Jeffray lay sick of the fever. Her heart waxed very tender towards the man, despite her wounded pride and Mrs. Barbara's insolence. If only it had been her lot to wait on Jeffray and spend her desire in such sweet service! If he had only fallen sick in Ursula's cottage and lain there to be nursed by her as she had tended him that night not long ago! She felt desperate enough for her own sake as she thought of Dan. Ursula would have discovered her flight by now, and doubtless the whole hamlet was as wise as Ursula.

Passing under the yews and out by the lodge gates, she leaned against the park walls to rest and think. She had little money in her pocket, and knew next to nothing of the world. Where should she go, and how should she come by food and shelter? The very thought of returning to Pevensel was an utter abhorrence to her soul, and now at Rodenham Priory she could win no welcome. To hide herself from Dan and Isaac, that was her whole desire. She would beg, slave, feed pigs to escape their treachery until Jeffray was recovered of his disease.

Much beset by her dreads and her dilemmas, she took the road for Rodenham village after a last look at the priory half hidden amid its trees. She felt tired and hungry, having forgotten to take even a loaf with her in her fever to be gone. Her shoes were dusty, her mouth dry, for she had not drunk since dawn, when she had taken water in her palms from a brook that ran through the woods. She would go down to the village to buy food, despite the danger that the boors might set Dan on her track if he hunted her by way of Rodenham. Then, with her strength refreshed, she could trudge on towards Rookhurst, and perhaps find refuge as a servant in some farm-house.

As Bess was passing the garden gate of the rectory above the church, she saw a fat gentleman in his shirt-sleeves weeding the gravel path that wound up to the house. The place looked very peaceful in the morning light, with its tiled gables showing above chestnuts, yews, and hollies, and a single trail of smoke ascending from one tall chimney-stack. Bess conjectured that it was the parsonage, and that the stout gentleman was the incumbent. She knew nothing much of parsons save that they preached on the ten commandments, made wedlock honest, and baptized

babies. Dr. Sugg's red face was turned towards her as she stood outside the gate looking wistfully in. The rector had a garden-trug beside him and a hoe in his right hand. He was proud of his flowers and fruit trees, and was more severe on weeds than he was on sinners.

Bess was looking at Dr. Sugg very steadfastly. Surely the old gentleman had a good-tempered face and a pair of kindly eyes that were inclined to twinkle. Why should she not lay the burden of her distress before his broad, buckled shoes, and, being a man of God, he should be able to advise her. She turned in suddenly at the gate, purposing to try the sincerity of the old gentleman's profession.

"May I speak with you, sir?"

Dr. Sugg stood up with several daisy roots in his hand, and stared at Bess with his shrewd and genial eyes. At the first glance, with her black hair and ruddy face, she might have been taken for a gypsy. A closer scrutiny suggested a more romantic and interesting vagrant. The girl was strangely handsome, with a fine carriage and almost the air of a great lady, and Dr. Sugg always had an appreciative smile for a comely woman.

"Well, Susan, what can I do for you?"

The rector addressed all young women as "Susan," a fatherly and comprehensive pseudonyme that mingled benignity with good-humor. Bess's lips parted in a smile. The old gentleman's manner pleased her, and she thought he appeared capable of being trusted.

"Are you a parson, sir?"

Dr. Sugg seemed amused by the blunt innocence of the question. He threw the daisy roots into the trug, and reached for his coat that was hanging on a neighboring laurel.

"I happen to be the rector of Rodenham, young woman," he said, studying her with the professional eye.

"Will you give me your advice, sir?"

"My advice is at your service, my dear, for what it is worth."

Bess had come well within the gate. She stood before the rector, with her black hair peeping out from under the hood of her cloak and her eyes fixed steadfastly on Dr. Sugg's face. The rector had never heard a professional beggar ask him for his advice, and there was much in the girl's manner that pleased him. He had perused her lines admiringly, and noticed the beautiful cleanliness of her clothes. It was not often that so tall and fine a girl was to be seen trudging the high-road through Rodenham.

"Well, my dear," he said, with a shrewd smile, "how can I advise you?"

Bess's eyes were still fixed frankly on his face. Their expression convinced the reverend gentleman that this red-mouthed Phœbe was telling the truth.

"My trouble is just this, sir," she confessed: "My kinsfolk want to bully me into

marriage against my will, and I ran away from home last night, and came to see Mr. Jeffray yonder, who had promised to be my friend."

Parson Sugg elevated his eyebrows and noticed that Bess was blushing prettily.

"Mr. Jeffray's ill with the small-pox," he said.

"So they told me, sir, at the house. It was a great distress to me."

Dr. Sugg took snuff, sneezed twice with emphasis, and glanced at Bess with a curious twinkle in his eyes.

"Are you from Pevensel, my dear?"

"Yes, sir."

"One of the Grimshaws, eh?"

Bess nodded, and watched the stolid passage of thought over the rector's good-natured countenance.

"And are you the girl, my dear, for whom Mr. Jeffray had his head broken in the woods?"

Bess laughed and colored, her eyes brightening wonderfully.

"Mr. Jeffray saved me from my cousin Dan," she confessed.

Dr. Sugg shook his head reprovingly, and yet smiled as though he thoroughly sympathized with Mr. Richard in the adventure. He had heard of the affair from Jeffray himself. His respect for the young squire was solid and sincere. Possibly it was this same affection for his patron and a lively liking for this forest wench that persuaded the good-natured old gentleman to interest himself in her behalf.

"So Mr. Jeffray offered to play the protector to you?" he asked.

"He is an honorable gentleman, sir."

"Egad, you are quite right, my dear. And this would-be husband of yours, you don't fancy him, eh?"

The sincerity of her disrelish was passioned forth on the girl's face.

"I hate him," she answered, hotly, "for he has tried to play many a coward's trick by me. It was only the pistols Mr. Jeffray gave me that saved me last night. I want to hide myself, sir, till Mr. Jeffray is recovered."

Dr. Sugg looked grave and not a little puzzled. The girl's frank and childish trust in the master of Rodenham was certainly a charming Platonism, but one that might lead to delicate complications. Richard Jeffray might be a generous young gentleman, and a man of honor, but he had hardly arrived at that patriarchal and convincing age when romantic philanthropy becomes disinterested in the eyes of the world. Bess Grimshaw's spirit pleased the old gentleman not a little. He was a born sportsman as well as a Christian, and was honestly concerned for the girl's future.

"What's your age, my dear?" he asked, settling his wig and brushing the snuff from his waistcoat.

"Two-and-twenty, sir."

“Can you milk and cook and use your needle?”

Bess smiled and confessed to all these accomplishments.

“I would serve in a farm-house,” she said, “to get myself an honest home.”

Dr. Sugg appeared to be pondering the matter with all the gravity he could gather. That he was justified in abetting the girl’s frank spirit of independence he had no doubt at all. Besides, his efforts on her behalf could not fail to please Richard Jeffray should that gentleman recover.

“Listen to me, my dear,” he said, at length. “Farmer Pelham, of Beechhurst, needs a girl. He is an honest fellow, and his wife is a kindly body. Supposing I take my nag and see about the place for you?”

Bess looked as though she were ready to embrace Dr. Sugg and his proposal at one and the same moment.

“I should bless the chance, sir,” she said.

“That is spoken like a woman of sense.”

“I don’t mind about the pay, sir.”

Dr. Sugg twinkled and patted the girl’s shoulder.

“You leave it to me, my dear,” he said. “I like your honesty and the way you have trusted me. It is a pleasure to help those who are willing to help themselves. You can make yourself comfortable at the rectory for the day; my daughter Mary will make you welcome. There, give me a kiss, my dear, to show your good feeling.”

And Bess kissed the old gentleman, a display of gratitude that might have shocked most grievously the more straitlaced of Dr. Sugg’s parishioners.

Mary Sugg assumed an air of mild and genteel hauteur when her father brought Bess into the parlor and desired his daughter to exercise his hospitality in the girl’s behalf. Like many plain and pious young women, Mary Sugg was inclined to view beauty with suspicion and to make of virtue a Madonna of Ugliness. She conceived it to be distinctly indiscreet of her father to introduce a strange girl into the house, especially when Janet and Sarah, the housemaid and the cook, had fled the place because of the small-pox. Mary Sugg atoned for her grimness, however, by being the possessor of a kind heart and a sympathetic nature. She made Bess a gracious little courtesy, and looked shyly at the girl, who was gazing round the parlor, with its solid Dutch furniture, its bookshelves, and its prints. A tall clock ticked sententiously beside the door. The chintz-curtained windows looked out upon the lawn and flower-beds, where Dr. Sugg’s daffodils and crocuses were in bloom.

The rector took his daughter apart into the hall, and, after closing the door, told her the whole of Bess’s trouble. Dr. Sugg was a great man when giving voice to his opinions, and his daughter still believed him certain of a bishopric. Perhaps, also, it was Bess’s very virtuous disinclination to be married that impressed Miss Mary’s virgin heart. Besides, Richard Jeffray had promised the girl help, and poor Mary

thought Mr. Richard one of the sweetest fellows in Christendom. Therefore, she kissed her father and declared that she approved heartily of his sentiments and his sensibility.

"Why should not the girl stay with us?" she said, of a sudden, her tired eyes brightening. "Now that Janet and Sarah have left us I should like some help, and I do not want to get a woman up from the village."

Dr. Sugg slapped his thigh, and regarded Mary as though she were a genius.

"Bless my soul," he said, "what a clodpoll I am, to be sure. The very thing, my dear. The wench has been clear of the fever, and if she will stay with us there is no need for me to ride to Beechhurst. Go in and talk to her yourself, Mary."

Miss Sugg's sallow face had flushed a little.

"To be sure," she exclaimed, "she looks a very decent young woman, clean and capable. I am surprised, sir—"

"Surprised, Mary?" asked the rector, with an amused twinkle.

"That a girl out of Pevensel should look so neat and respectable."

"Can any good thing come out of Nazareth, eh?"

"Yes, father."

"Egad, many good things do originate from Nazareth, my dear—more, I imagine, than from polite Jerusalem."

Mary Sugg returned to the parlor, and confessed with some shy courtesy to Bess that the rector himself was in need of a servant. Could Bess cook and milk and mend stockings? Bess's eyes were fixed searchingly on Miss Sugg's face for the moment as though probing her sincerity. Contrasts that they were, there was a gentleness and an air of quiet sympathy about the parson's daughter that appealed instinctively to the child of the woods. She met Mary's offer in the spirit that prompted it, and thanked her with a tremulous light in her eyes.

"Madam," she said, with simple stateliness, holding out her hand and making poor Mary look utterly commonplace, "I thank you for your kindness and your trust in me. I will serve you with all my heart."

There is magic in gratitude, and Mary, blushing shyly, took Bess's hand and liked the girl unreservedly from that moment.

"My father is a kind man," she said, a little confusedly; "he is always ready to help those who are in trouble."

"And I see that you are his daughter, madam."

"I hope I try to be worthy of him, my dear."

It was a quaint sight to see Mary Sugg with her awkward little body and her ugly face mothering Bess, who could have carried her in her arms like a child. Bess seemed to become strangely sweet and gentle. Her heart had gone out to this faded, shrivelled little person with the quiet face and the pale, short-sighted eyes. She was

soon talking to Mary of her life in Pevensel, and Miss Sugg's shocked face was a study in pained propriety when she heard of Dan's brutality. Yet Mary Sugg was a very simple and untainted young woman for all her primness, and there was a certain inevitable ardor in Bess's personality that appealed to good women and to children.

Mary took the girl into the kitchen, brewed her some coffee, and saw that she ate an honest meal. Then she showed her the whole house—the attic that was to be her bedroom, the press where the clean linen was kept, the closet where the pans and brushes were. She gave Bess one of her own aprons, an old pair of house shoes, and a cap. Bess had much of the practical in her constitution, and, moreover, she was burning to prove her gratitude to her friends. There was to be a leg of mutton for Dr. Sugg's dinner that day. Bess bared her brown forearms, fastened on her apron, and blessed old Ursula for having taught her to be useful. Dr. Sugg was delighted with her cooking and with the quiet and graceful way she waited at table. Mary, a perfect housewife herself, congratulated her father on their refugee's success.

"The girl looks quite a lady," she said. "I must say I am in love with her, though she has only been with us half a day. I trust her terrible kinsfolk will not trouble her here."

Dr. Sugg frowned and looked bellicose.

"The authority of this house," he answered, "is sufficient to awe the rascals. My sympathies are wholly with the girl, my dear, and I shall protect her to the best of my ability."

XXII

The old parsonage house, with its sombre atmosphere and its silence broken only by the ticking of the great Dutch clock in the parlor, seemed to Bess a secluded hermitage where she would be safe from her kinsfolk and from the savagery of her forest lover. The kitchen was in the wing at the back of the house, shut off from the fields by Dr. Sugg's orchard and a holly hedge, and parted on the west from the church-yard by the garden and a high stone-wall. The very consciousness of her nearness to Jeffray filled her with contentment. She flitted about the brick-paved kitchen singing to herself at times, and thinking of Jeffray as she did her work. There was the cow to be called in from the parsonage meadow and milked at dawn and sunset. Mary Sugg herself answered the kitchen door so that Bess's presence should be kept as secret as possible. Dr. Sugg alone went into Rodenham village, for since the breaking out of the small-pox his daughter had kept to the house and garden, leaving such business as lay outside the rectory to her father. Bess served her new friends with all the ardor of her nature. She brushed Dr. Sugg's coat for him, buckled on his shoes, and warmed his slippers. As for Miss Mary, she had fallen coyly in love with their handsome handmaid, and treated her more as a friend than as a servant.

Each day Dr. Sugg would trudge up to the priory and make inquiries after Richard Jeffray's health. For Bess it was the culminating moment in the day when she unlocked the front-door for the rector—for they kept the door locked—saw him hang his hat in the hall, and heard him remark with a twinkle that "Mr. Jeffray was doing very well." Bess would turn back, in her red petticoat, white cap and apron, into the kitchen and sing softly to herself as she turned the joint on the spit, polished the pewter, or peeled apples for a tart. As yet she knew nothing of Jeffray's betrothal to Miss Hardacre, and in her simple and passionate way she let her imagination roam at will. It was more a rare and sensuous dream with the girl, a passing and repassing of mysterious and alluring visions. Practical as she was in the trivialities of life, she became a desirous-eyed child of nature when love opened the gates of the sunset and of the dawn.

As for Miss Mary Sugg, she was a very modest creature, and had grown to regard the passionate intoxications of life as bordering on indecency. Like many inevitable spinsters, she had become ashamed, as it were, of her own sex, and the very reading of the banns in church made her mouth straighten primly and her hands clasp each other more chastely in her lap. The parson's daughter appeared sincerely disturbed when Bess spoke to her of her life in Pevensel. Prudence and propriety! The very thought of such savagery as Dan's sent a pious shiver through Miss Sugg's frame. She admired Bess for her courage, and even looked up to her with some sort

of awe as to one who had survived terrible temptings of the devil. Bess grew to trust the prim, kindly little creature in the course of a few days. She felt greatly moved to pet Miss Sugg, to stroke her gentle face, and caress her as a child might caress some smiling and delightful grandmother. Poor Mary took Bess's attentions with blushes and a secret sense of pleasure. It had been her lot to be one of the odd women in the world, slighted by every one with the exception of Richard Jeffray and her father.

It has been said that Mary Sugg regarded matrimony with suspicion, and though Miss Sugg had not the remotest hope of marrying Richard Jeffray herself, she had no liking for his betrothal to Jilian Hardacre. Mary, like all women of sense, was something of a gossip, and it was at Rodenham parsonage that Bess learned at last of Jeffray's entanglement at Hardacre. Mary was helping Bess to clean the silver and the pewter in the pantry when she let the truth slip casually into the girl's ears.

Bess started, reddened, and went on polishing Dr. Sugg's tankard as though the news had no concern for her heart.

"I did not know Mr. Jeffray was to be married," she said, frowning a little, and staring out of the narrow window.

Miss Sugg, lost in her own reflections for the moment, noticed nothing strained or unnatural in Bess's manner.

"Yes, I suppose it will soon be quite an old affair," she said, with a sigh.

"And is Miss Hardacre very handsome?"

"A matter of opinion, my dear."

"Mr. Jeffray is very much in love with her?"

Miss Sugg's mouth tightened primly.

"It is not my business," she said, quietly, "to inquire into the warmth and nature of a gentleman's affections."

Poor Bess, her forecastings of the future were greatly changed by those few words of Mary Sugg's. She woke no longer in the morning with a rush of joy to hear the thrushes singing in the parsonage garden. All her quaint imaginings were past and gone, for she was woman enough to feel the significance of this new truth. A kind of hopelessness took possession of her, a conviction that Jeffray had given her nothing but pity, and that all her dreams had been made of mist. Miss Hardacre was a great lady, and of course Mr. Jeffray was right in wishing to marry her. Bess went about her work with a dull ache at her heart. She no longer dreamed of the day when she should see Jeffray face to face again; rather, she dreaded the very thought of it, and grew full of a bitter humbleness that softened her whole nature. Her one yearning was to be saved from Dan and Isaac, to be left in peace awhile, unquestioned and alone.

It was the seventh evening of Bess's sojourn at the parsonage. Dr. Sugg had gone down into the village to visit certain of the villagers who were sick to death of the fever, and Miss Sugg was sitting in her bedroom, sewing. Bess had been sweeping the kitchen and polishing the pewter and the plate. The evening was full

of the splendor of spring, birds singing in every tree, and the sky a great sheet of gold in the west. The garden looked so green and fair with the sunlight shimmering through upon the grass, and daffodils asleep in the shade, that Bess had opened the garden door and looked up at the blue zenith and the golden west. The broad beds would soon be ablaze with tulips, red and white. Anemones and primroses were flowering in the shrubbery, and the gorse on the heath above Rodenham was gilding the purple of the hills.

Halting suddenly as she crossed the grass, she fancied that she caught the sound of footsteps close by in the church-yard. The stone-wall that divided the burial-ground, with its gray headstones and its yews, from the parsonage garden, stood some seven feet high, and was tufted along the summit with gilliflower and grass. Bess ran her eyes suspiciously along the edge that cut the gold of the western sky. Suddenly, just above her, she saw a pair of hairy hands come over the wall, the fingers clawing at the stone-work to gain a surer hold. A fur cap jerked up above the wall; a face followed it, the mouth agape, the eyes straining right and left into the dusk.

Bess, standing stone-still, recognized Dan, her cousin. He had a red handkerchief knotted about his forehead, and a pad of lamb's-wool over his wounded ear. Her fear of him made her like Lot's wife for the moment, as she stood discovered on the open lawn. She was conscious only of the grin on the man's face, as he stared at her, and of the great, hairy hands still gripping the wall.

Her pistol! She felt in her bosom for it, and found with a shock of horror that she had left it in the attic. Dan, who had scrambled astride the wall, gave a hoarse shout and waved his hand. Bess had turned and was racing for the house. She heard Dan leap down from the wall and come padding after her across the grass. Mary Sugg's white and terrified face showed for a moment at one of the upper windows. The parson's daughter saw two more men leap down from the church-yard into the garden.

Bess stumbled over the step at the kitchen door, and half fell across the threshold. She struggled up and in, and clapped to the door, only to find Dan's weight heaving against it before she could put up the bar. The latch and bolt gave way like brittle wood, and Bess herself was sent staggering against the wall. Before she could recover, Dan's great arms were round her, his face thrust close to hers, his breath beating on her cheek.

Bess struggled fiercely, beating one fist in his face, and striving to untwine herself from his arms. He was too strong for her, however, and she read the savage delight of it in his eyes. Crushing Bess to him, and lifting her off her feet, he carried her out into the garden, mocking her as she pleaded, fought, and threatened.

Isaac, and Solomon, his brother, were waiting under the holly hedge closing the orchard. They ran forward to meet Dan, and set to to bind Bess's wrists and ankles, while Dan held her down upon the grass. Isaac was mocking her the while with an exultation that made his smooth face seem diabolical under its white hair. Bess,

desperate, and struggling still, cursed him as he held her left arm pinned against the ground while Solomon knotted the cord about her wrist.

"Old man," she said, "be sure that I shall kill you some day."

Isaac, thrusting his hand into her hair, and twisting a mass of it about his fingers, wrenched at the strands till Bess cried out with pain.

"You would run away from us, eh! We'll cure you of your tricks, my lady. This is the last time you'll laugh at us, I guess."

"Devil—"

"That's as it may be, my dear. Quick, lad, tie up her feet. I'll shove this rag in her mouth and tie the cloth over it. That's the trick. Up with her, Dan, she's yours now, I reckon."

Dan took Bess in his arms, hugging her tight to his broad chest, and carried her through the orchard and out into the meadow. Isaac and Solomon followed, keeping a keen watch behind them to see whether they were to be meddled with from the house. On the road over Rodenham heath old Isaac's wagon was waiting, with three stout horses in the team. One of Solomon's sons, Enoch, held the ropes. There was a pile of loose straw in the wagon, and Dan, half throwing Bess in over the tail-board, climbed in after her and covered her with the straw. Isaac and Solomon clambered in after him, and, whipping up the horses, they went at a trot for the wooded slopes of Pevensel.

XXIII

Richard Jeffray's recovery from the small-pox was hailed by the tenants of the Rodenham estate as nothing less than a public blessing. The farmers were astute enough to know when they had a generous "booby" for a landlord, a man who could easily be cheated, and who was ready to listen to their grievances instead of sensibly grinding the gold out of their tough and materialistic hearts. Hence they listened with unction to Dr. Sugg's thanksgiving sermon, and thanked Providence when they realized that there would be no raising of their rents.

Even the Lady Letitia experienced a comfortable sensation when she read the good news in a letter from Dr. Sugg, or, rather, when Parsons read it to her at a distance of three paces, lest there should be any infection in the sheet. Jeffray was an amiable relative who might oblige her delicately on occasions. As for the Hardacre folk, their sympathies were centred for the moment in their own family, for Jilian was abed with the small-pox, and Sir Peter and Mr. Lot were much agitated in their minds as to how her precious complexion would withstand the ravages of the disease.

There were flowers on the broad window-seat of Jeffray's bedroom window, flowers that should have testified to some gentle and soft-eyed presence in the house. Who was it that had set those gorgeous king-cups in that bowl of blue, filled those tall vases with wild hyacinths, and ranged the tulips red and white in pots along the window-ledge? No woman's hand had done the deed. Blunt Dick Wilson was the culprit on this occasion. Wilson, whose creased and cynical face had come back through Rodenham, tanned by the sea-wind and the sun upon the downs. Peter Gladden had shown no reluctance to delegate many of his duties to his master's friend, and the painter had put aside his brushes and busied himself with phials and feeding-cups, spoons and red flannel, warming-pans and iced-wine.

One May morning Richard sat at his open window, looking over the park towards Rodenham village and the purple slopes of Pevensel. There had been no Maying in the village that month, and the blackthorn and the broom, the palm and wild-cherry, had escaped unbroken, for though the pest appeared to have spent its malice, death had entered many of the cottages. George Gogg, of the Wheat Sheaf, had lost his daughter, a plump, black-haired, bright-eyed wench, whose red cheeks and red ribbons had turned many a young farmer's head. Old Sturtevant, the cobbler, had gone the way of all flesh, and several more of the villagers, men, women, and children, were lying under the green-sward in Rodenham church-yard. As for Jeffray, he was but in a feeble way himself, and Surgeon Stott had decreed it that he was to be troubled with no news from the outer world as yet.

Richard, muffled up in a dressing-gown, with dusky mottlings covering his thin

face, sat before the open window and looked out over the park. The disease had seized him sharply, but not dangerously, and even Richard had vanity enough to feel some satisfaction at Surgeon Stott's verdict that he would be left with few scars. There is a delicious languor in convalescence when the world seems to spread itself anew before the reawakened eyes, and life is reborn like a dream of renewed youth into the heart. Nature seems to welcome the exile with smiling eyes and soft breathings of her green-clad bosom. So might it have been for Richard that spring day as he saw the great trees standing so calm and still under the blue heavens, and the green billows of the park a-glisten under the sun.

Sickness is held to solemnize the soul, to chasten the understanding, and purge the passion out of man. It is considered to be a season of severe self-judgment, and of inward searchings of the heart, a season when religious impulses should struggle to the surface, and solemn promises be made to propitiate the god who has granted health. Such is the orthodox exposition of the doctrine of disease. The pious hand points to the precipice that has provided the mortal with a chance of realizing the abysses of the unknown.

But with Jeffray his recovery was as the coming forth of a moth from the cramping sack of custom. He had much to repent of in the past, but the repentance was romantic rather than religious. It was a lifting up of the hands to the light, not the wan and sickly light of prosaic morality, but the glow of the instincts that burn on the altar of nature, the life fire of love, of wonder, and of worship.

It was towards Bess—Bess of the Woods—that Jeffray's thoughts flew feverishly as he lay in bed or sat propped up in his chair before the window. He yearned to see that face again, to watch the light kindling in the keen-sighted eyes, to hear the deep and husky modulations of her voice. He was eager to learn whether she were safe from Dan or no, and to tell her why the tryst at Holy Cross had been broken. His thoughts hovered more tenderly about her radiant face bathed by the splendor of its dusky hair than about Miss Jilian's tawny head. His recollections of Miss Hardacre were neither satisfying to his soul nor flattering to the future. He remembered her as vain, peevish, ready to wax petulant over trifles, selfishly jealous of her own safety.

It is scarcely necessary to spin a flimsy tissue of words about Richard Jeffray's thoughts. Probably his illness had suffered his convictions to sink to the solid earth instead of drifting feather-like in air. Frankly, he discovered in himself a strong and aggressive disinclination to make Miss Jilian Hardacre his wife. It was no great psychological problem, but merely a question of nature asserting herself in the magic person of poor Bess. Bess was a finer and lovelier being than Miss Hardacre; she had more soul, more splendor of outline, more womanly suggestiveness. And thus Mr. Richard sat brooding in his chair, watching the clouds drift across the blue, and wondering what the near future had in store for him.

Perhaps Jeffray was not sorry to have his solitude broken by the sound of Dick Wilson's heavy and deliberate footsteps in the gallery, and the shining of his red

face round the edge of the oak door. The painter wore the same rusty suit of clothes, and he had been mourning his approaching parting with these well-worn retainers, for Surgeon Stott had ordered him to burn every shred of them before he left Rodenham. In danger of being "nonsuited," Mr. Dick was contemplating a descent upon the late Mr. Jeffray's wardrobe, since it was certain that he could not turn Adamite in the cause of cleanliness, and perhaps end in a mad-house by reason of his nudity.

Jeffray's pale face, with the shadow-rings under the eyes, lighted up at Wilson's coming. The painter had a roll of manuscript in his hand. He went and sat in the window-seat, after pushing aside the bowl of king-cups, and patted the roll of paper with peculiar and amusing emphasis.

"May I congratulate you, sir," he said, "on having revived the spirit of the Elizabethans?"

Jeffray colored, like a boy whose mother has caught him inditing verses to a pretty milliner.

"What! You have been reading my epic, Dick?"

"I have, sir, I have. I discovered it in the library, and you will pardon the friendly curiosity that prompted me to bury my nose in it."

Jeffray laughed shyly, and lay back with his hands clasped behind his head. The painter had unfolded the roll, and, holding it before him, with a quaint and sententious pride, read the three opening stanzas of the poem.

"There is life for you," he said, warmly. "The divine utterance, the gushing out of song."

Jeffray's face was still red under his waving hair. He laughed, the quiet, pleased laugh of aspiring yet incredulous youth, and looked at Wilson with affectionate amusement.

"I am glad you like the work, Dick," he said. "Heaven knows, I have copied nobody, and yet my lines seem childish when set beside Pope's or Dryden's."

"Childish, sir, and if they are childish, you should thank Heaven for their innocence. As for Pope, he's nothing but a pedant setting prose on stilts, and trying to make her tread a stately measure. Why, sir, his poetry is like a respectable old lady knitting epigrams together on her needles. Dash his preciseness, and his pompous and ponderous conceit! Set him beside Will Shakespeare, and you will hear an artificial waterfall trying to thunder against the sea."

Jeffray smiled, and stretched out his hand for the manuscript. He glanced at the neat and sensitive writing with satisfaction, moving his lips the while as though reading certain of his favorite passages over to himself.

"But what would the critics say of them?" he asked.

"Critics, sir!"

"Yes."

Wilson blew his nose with great vigor, and grimaced as though he had swallowed vinegar. He reached for a volume of the *Annual Register*, that was lying on the table beside Jeffray's chair, and opened the book at the place dedicated to verse.

"Here, sir," he said, holding the volume at arm's-length and declaiming, sententiously, through his nose—"here is the sort of stuff we English feed the imaginative passion on.

" 'TO A ROBIN

" 'Sweet social bird! Whose soft harmonious lays
Swell the glad song of thy Creator's praise,
Say, art thou conscious of approaching ills?
Fell winter's storms, the pointed blast that kills?'

"There, sir, there's the proper pedantic stuff for you. It puzzles me to think what our English woods would be like if all the 'sweet social birds' sang in that fashion. And can you tell me, sir, why winter is always 'fell' with these gentlemen, and any poor thrush 'a member of the feathered tribe'? Damn it, why can't they call a wind a wind, instead of 'Black Boreas's breath,' or some such scholarly twaddle? I tell you, Richard, this sort of stuff sickens me; it is like looking at some painted and behooped old hag, and trying to think she's a pretty shepherdess. Why, sir, your verses are as different from them as the scent of new-mown hay from the scent of a beauty's pomade-box. They smell of the downs and of the woods and the sea, sir—they do that, by gad!"

Jeffray was watching the strenuous play of thought on Wilson's countenance.

"Then you do not think, Dick, that my poetry would be popular?"

An indescribable flash of ironical amusement leaped across the painter's face.

"Popular!"

"Yes."

"No, sir; plain people who love nature and the truth are not popular in these learned days. Why, were I to paint one of your Sussex landscapes with the dawn coming up over the downs a great gush of gold, not a soul would look at it; but if I took Lady Tomfool, draped her, shoved her in front of a bit of a Greek temple, made her strike some silly attitude, and called her Juno or Proserpine, or Alcestis returned from Hades, all the silly women would crowd round and gape at it, and declare that I had a most classic style."

Jeffray laughed, and lay back with a thoughtful light in his eyes, as he watched the cloud shadows playing over the sunny heights of Pevensel. Wilson was drumming on the window-sill with his fingers, and still holding the *Annual Register* upon his knee. He was watching Richard with a grave and bent-browed tenderness,

seeming to see in him the spirit of the coming age, when fine gentlemen would give up the carrying of muffs and the writing of odes in imitation of Horace. Men would wake again to the beauty that lived in the woods and upon the mountains. But for the present, Wilson had other duties to perform beside the praising of Jeffray's poetry. He had been intrusted by Surgeon Stott with the responsibility of breaking the news of Miss Hardacre's illness to his host. He had desired to put the lad in as good spirits as possible before flinging the unpleasant confession in his face.

"There is no doubt, Richard," he said, slowly, "that you have the true fire in you. Go on, sir, go on as you have begun, and let the big-bellied academicals snort and blow rhetoric through their noses. But the Muses must go flower-gathering for a moment; I have another matter on my mind this morning."

There was a forced and suspicious cheerfulness in Wilson's voice that made Richard Jeffray turn his eyes to him from the slopes of Pevensel. The painter had something of the air of a nurse, who was about to administer physic to a child, pretending barefacedly the while that it was sweet and palatable as sugared milk. Wilson's eyes were fixed on the *Annual Register* in his hand; he was turning the leaves and glancing perfunctorily from page to page.

"You are not the only sick person in the neighborhood, Richard," he said, significantly; "they say that love is wondrous sympathetic, and that your Corydon can feel the toothache that is swelling in his Chloe's cheek."

Jeffray stared at Wilson with vague surprise.

"What do you mean, Dick?" he asked.

"Mean, sir! Why, your betrothed, like the sweet lady that she is, has been keeping you company in the matter of boluses and bleedings, that is all."

"Jilian ill?"

Wilson nodded and exercised his facial muscles in the production of a reassuring smile.

"Miss Hardacre caught the small-pox, sir," he explained, "but she is facing it famously, and Stott declares her to be out of danger. Let me assure you, Richard, that there is no need for you to distress yourself about the lady. Stott forbade me to mention her illness to you until he felt convinced that she would recover."

Jeffray leaned back in his chair with a sigh, frowned, and stared fixedly out of the window.

"I must have given it to her, Dick," he said.

Wilson shut the book up with a snap.

"Nonsense!" he retorted. "Why imagine such a thing? Nothing is to be gained by saddling one's self with hypothetical responsibilities."

The sensitive lines about Jeffray's mouth had deepened, and there was a strained look about his eyes. Wilson, who was watching him affectionately, misread the whole meaning of the mood. He assumed Richard to be in love with Miss Jilian, and

magnified his friend's distress like the warm-hearted fellow that he was.

"Dick."

"Well, sir?"

"Has she had it badly? Will it—will it disfigure her?"

Wilson shut one eye and sniffed, an expression peculiar to him in moments of deep feeling.

"Confound it!" he said, cheerfully, "why heap up imaginery woes, sir? Stott has said nothing about scars. Besides, my dear friend, the lady will recover, and that is the great thing, eh?"

Jeffray lay back heavily in his chair.

"Yes, that is the great thing," he answered.

XXIV

Three days after hearing of Jilian's illness, Jeffray took his first drive with Wilson, in a light chaise that his father had used when his increasing feebleness had debarred him from the saddle. Dame Meg, the most sedate mare in the stable, was between the traces, with Wilson, who was equal to ruling so amiable a lady, in possession of the reins. They rattled through the park and turned down towards Rodenham village, intending to follow the Lewes coach-road as far as the Lane that branched off to Thorney Chapel, a hamlet lying under the southern slopes of Pevensel. Jeffray, who felt the fog shifting from his brain as they rolled along under the open sky, dilated to Wilson on the beauties of the place, insisting that he must paint it, and that he, Richard, would be the purchaser of the picture. He had been striving to persuade the painter to pass the summer at the priory, a kindness that Mr. Dick's pride found some difficulty in accepting.

As they drove down into Rodenham village several of the women ran out to courtesy to the young squire and grin congratulations at him on his recovery. Richard bowed to them with a pleasant color rising in his cheeks. He was a man whose natural desire was to be loved and trusted by his fellows, and any affection that was shown to him inevitably kindled a kindred feeling in his heart. On the steps of the Wheat Sheaf they saw George Gogg standing, his hands thrust into his breeches-pockets under his apron, and a blackened clay pipe between his teeth. Jeffray bade Wilson draw up before the inn while he spoke sympathetically to the old man on the loss of his daughter. George Gogg's face looked flushed and sodden as though he had been drinking heavily to drown his thoughts. His blue eyes, that seemed to see everything and understand nothing, stared blankly at the roofing of the village pump.

"Well, sir," he said, "Parson Sugg tells me as how it is God's way of doing things, and I reckon it is a comfortable sort of notion that no man can quarrel with. I mus' say my poor wench was a purty wench, and I reckon she won't disgrace 'em up above in the matter of looks. Anyway, the angels have got her, sir, for she was a gal as never did nobody any harm. Her old father can best say 'hallelujah,' and think a bit more of trying to climb up after her, and with Parson Sugg's leave, sir, I'll hang on to his coat-tails till I feel a bit surer of my feet. Will it please your honor to take a glass of wine?"

Jeffray shook Gogg's hand sympathetically, and declined the courtesy.

"You have your boy, Gogg," he said, kindly.

"Yes, I have the boy, sir, and he's a stocky lad, though a bit fond of helping himself to other folk's fruit. I am glad to see your honor looking so fit and hearty."

"Thank you, Gogg, I am nearly myself again."

“And I hope, sir, you will be soon saying the same of your good lady—Miss Hardacre.”

Jeffray’s face hardened at the innkeeper’s words; the frank, beaming look died out of the eyes, the angles of the sensitive mouth sank instantly. Even this fat fool’s suavity seemed to summon before his eyes all those grim and staring sentimentalities that hemmed him in like a crowd of attorneys. George Gogg’s round person vanished with its white-stockinged legs and dirty apron, and in its place Jeffray beheld the implacable Sir Peter and Mr. Lot’s red and arrogant face. A small crowd of children had gathered about the chaise, their natural impertinence suppressed by a hoped for largesse of pence. Jeffray threw some coppers among them as Wilson flapped the reins on Dame Meg’s back. The brats scrambled and fought for the money, one urchin, a head taller than the rest, concluding the scramble by forcing the pennies from the fists of the feebler competitors. Richard’s munificence had wrought more woe than pleasure. There was much blubbering and squealing, much running together of angry mothers, ready to squabble over their children’s feuds.

There was an amused glint in Wilson’s eyes as he caught a glimpse of Jeffray’s melancholy face.

“See, sir,” he said, “the evils of too promiscuous a generosity. There is about as much evil caused in this world by giving as by grinding. As to that pretty superstition with regard to the beautiful innocence of childhood, it is about as outrageous a myth as ever rose out of the affectations of maternity. Children are generally worse than animals, sir, since they inherit all the devilish and human cunning of their ancestors.”

Jeffray lay back in the chaise as though he were weary.

“What it means to be an idealist!” he said.

“Live on a desert island and you may succeed,” quoth the painter, with a smile.

The day was one of those magical days in May when the earth seems radiant as for a bridal. A pearly haze hung like a great veil of gossamer, tempering the blue of the cloudless heavens. The wind that came from the east was scarcely strong enough to set the bluebells nodding in the woods, or to scatter the fading blackthorn blossom from the boughs. Despite his unlovely recollections of Rodenham village, Jeffray’s spirit kindled as the chaise threaded the green, and he saw the chaffinches darting in the hedgerows, and the larks shivering and singing in the sun. Over the ploughed lands the crops were thrusting up a myriad emerald spears, and already the buttercups were gilding the quiet meadows.

They came to the lane that branched off from the high-road, and wound over green hills and plunged into forest hollows towards the hamlet of Thorney Chapel. The woods rose up before them with all the deepening mystery of May as Dame Meg drew the chaise between the hedgerows. Dome on dome, and height on height, the trees were piled towards the blue. The spirits of spring were spinning

everywhere, bronze for the oak, silver and gold for the poplar and the willow, shimmering green for the birch, beech, and thorn. Yonder a great larchwood rose solemn and stiff beneath a thousand emerald spires. Dark yews and pines stood black amid the lighter multitude. About the pillared fore-courts of the forest the gorse was fringed and seamed with gold. Purple orchids had speared through their sheaths. Bluebells dusted each lush green knoll. The broom blazed like living fire.

The lane had turned down from the woods into a shallow valley that ran east and west under the shadows of Pevensel. Meadow-land filled it, with here and there a pine thicket isleted amid the green, while astride the road lay the hamlet of Thorney, some half a score timbered cottages huddled about a tumble-down inn. To the east of the hamlet, and divided from it by a small stream and a fourteen-acre meadow, stood Thorney Chapel, a squat, sombre-colored building of stone with an open belfry and a wooden porch.

A few frowsy women, with children hanging about their skirts, were loitering outside the chapel-gate as the chaise came down the hill towards the hamlet. Wilson, who had a keen scent for all the human interests of life, however trite and humble they might seem, prophesied that a country wedding was in progress.

"To be sure, May is an unlucky month," he said, with a smile, "but the sun will shine on the bride; and, confound it, sir, the majority of wedded couples might have been tied together in May to judge by the unlucky show they make in after life. See, they seem to be coming out; the brats and the shes are pointing their noses up the path. Let's stop, sir, and watch."

The chapel burial-ground was bounded by a low stone-wall, and within two gnarled thorns and a few yews watched over the lichened stones that looked distinctly irreverent in their convivial attitudes. The bell in the open belfry began to clang vigorously. The women and children crowded round the gate, elbowing one another to enjoy one of the rare and elemental sights life in such a wilderness provided.

Wilson had drawn the chaise up under one of the thorn-trees that overhung the wall. He tilted his hat on to the back of his head, dropped the reins, and wiped his forehead with a red cotton handkerchief.

"This would have been a chance for that knave Herrick," he said, with a wink. "His muse was wanton, but his life was chaste, so he said, sir, the fox. He should have been a pleasant old pagan, should Robert Herrick. He and Mr. Ovid would have made Miss Venus a lovely pair of twins."

Richard, leaning forward slightly in the chaise, was watching the folk who were filing out of the chapel porch while the bell creaked to and fro in the belfry overhead. There were half a dozen lads and men with flowers in their hats and green jackets on their backs, chuckling and elbowing one another outside the porch. Richard saw the bride come out upon the bridegroom's arm, a tall, black-haired girl gowned in green, with a garland of flowers on her head, rosemary and ribbons in her bosom. Her face looked strained and white in the sun, her dark eyes sullen and

restless, like the eyes of one afraid. Her hand was laid lightly on the sleeve of the bridegroom's coat, and she seemed to hold apart from him, as though there were more hate in her heart than love.

There was a shout from the lads and men.

"The garters—the garters—"

It was a coarse custom in some country-sides that the oafs should scramble for the bride's ribbons. One lad, bolder than the rest, seized hold of the bride's gown, and began to fumble about her ankles. The others followed him, and amid much coarse laughter, struggling and scrambling, the garters were torn from below the bride's knees. She stood motionless the while, her face flushing crimson, her teeth biting into her lips.

Jeffray's face was like the face of a man undergoing torture. It was Bess—Bess of the Woods, mocked by this ribaldry, Bess looking miserable and fierce as any Cassandra wedded against her will. Richard's eyes were fixed on her face as she moved on down the path beside Dan—Dan dressed out in his best clothes, rosemary in his button-hole and ribbons in his hat. Bess held her head very high, looking neither to the right hand nor the left. A few children threw flowers at her as she passed, but she seemed neither to notice them nor the stupid, curious faces at the gate. Limping behind her, bareheaded, came Isaac Grimshaw, his white hair shining in the sun. Solomon and his sons followed with old Ursula and the rest of the forest-folk.

At the gate Black Dan turned suddenly, clawed Bess's waist, and put up his great, hairy face, sweating with satisfaction, for the bride's kiss. What followed seemed swift as the flash of a swallow across the calm surface of a pond. Jeffray, looking with terrible earnestness at Bess, saw her face flush scarlet and a fierce flare of hate stream up into her eyes. She twisted herself free of Dan of a sudden, and swept him a blow with the back of the hand across the mouth.

There was a loud burst of laughter from the crowd at the gate. Dan's face darkened, as though he were minded to return the blow had not Isaac limped in between them and cursed Bess in an undertone. Old Ursula was beginning to snivel, and at the same instant Bess's eyes fell on the chaise waiting under the shadow of the thorn. She stood rigid, staring at Jeffray, her mouth working, her bosom rising and falling. For the moment the look in her eyes was as the look of a hunted thing ready to run for shelter to Jeffray's feet. Then the soul seemed to ebb out of her again. She hung her head as though ruined and ashamed, and swayed out of the gate, her hands hanging limply at her sides. Dan followed her, grinning and slouching his heavy shoulders. Isaac, Ursula, and the rest crowded behind them along the road.

Wilson, who had been utterly unconscious of Jeffray at his elbow, laughed cynically, and watched Bess, who was thrusting aside the arm Dan offered her.

"Zounds!" he said, "the wench has a temper; she looks too fine to be broken by that boor. I never saw a woman seem less willing. Why, Richard, lad, what's amiss

with you, eh?”

Jeffray was lying back in the chaise, white as linen, with his eyes half closed. He had bitten his lower lip till the red blood showed in contrast to his gray, strained face.

“I am faint, Dick, nothing more.”

“Let me drive you to the inn and get some brandy.”

“No, no, turn back home. I shall be better with the east wind blowing in my face.”

XXV

Jeffray lay back in the chaise with the landscape moving unmeaningly before his eyes. He felt numb and cold, utterly humiliated for Bess's sake. Painter Dick, who had scarcely so much as heard of this Belphœbe of the woods, was the last person to suspect that the fierce-faced girl who had smitten her husband on the mouth had any tragic hold over Jeffray's destiny. The eager joy in the loveliness of the May morning had overtaxed Richard's strength. Wilson knew something of the exhaustion that may follow even an innocent intoxication of the senses.

As for Richard, he was as a man who had held some rich and precious vase between his hands, gazing at it wonderingly, only to find it slip and shatter itself in fragments at his feet. What had happened in the forest that Bess should have become Dan Grimshaw's wife? Had she despaired of escaping the man, and in a fit of dumb indifference pledged her troth in token of surrender? Richard's hope in her rebelled at such a paltry reading of the riddle. No, Bess had more heart, more pride than that. They had tricked her, Dan and old Isaac between them—Isaac, that white-haired and soft-voiced old devil whom he had once taken for a saint. They had tricked her, and this marriage had been the only end.

Question and counter-question played through Jeffray's brain. Why had not Bess come to him for help? Perhaps the news of his illness had reached her; perhaps she had heard of his betrothal to Miss Hardacre? He had read that jealousy was a strong and subtle passion in a woman, but yet why should she be jealous, unless she loved him? His egotism might be confusing the inspiration. But—had Bess come to Rodenham while he was ill? The thought flashed through Jeffray like the news of a good friend's death. Why had he never asked so simple a question—and yet surely Peter Gladden would have told him if such a thing had happened! And yet the news of Jilian's illness had been kept from him till three days ago!

It was nearly noon when the spire of Rodenham church rose up against the blue. Dame Meg was going lazily, the reins slack upon her loins. Wilson, who was whistling an old Jacobite song, glanced curiously at Jeffray from time to time, wondering what made the lad look so fierce.

"You seem more yourself again, Richard," he said.

Jeffray changed his posture restlessly and unbuttoned his cloak. It is not easy to confide at times even in the best of friends, and sensitive mortals shrink from the first explanatory plunge. Jeffray had not the heart to unburden himself of his misery at that moment.

"I am well enough now, Dick," he said, quietly.

"You looked deuced green, sir, down by the chapel."

"Faintness—nothing more."

Wilson's words seemed to send Jeffray's thoughts winging back to the chapel in the valley. He remembered the whole scene as though it had been burned into his brain with fire. That look, so shamed and piteous, that Bess had given him, as though she yearned to him from amid the ruins of her pride! There would be the brutal bride—ale, the lewd jesting, the drinking, the rough, clownish games. Then would come scrambling for the bride's ribbons and for the rosemary she had worn. Her clean shift would be laid out on the bed all decked with bays and flowers. Cake and wine would be taken betwixt the bellowing of coarse and indecent songs.

Peter Gladden's placid and imperturbable face seemed to offer an unconscious admonition towards calmness as he came forward to help his master out of the chaise. Jeffray appeared to have become oblivious of the fact that he was a convalescent; he brushed Gladden's arm aside, threw off his cloak, and tossed it aside in the porch.

"Gladden," he said, with a peculiar tightness about the mouth, "I want to speak with you alone in the library."

"At once, sir?"

There was just the faintest shade of curiosity upon the butler's face.

"Yes, Gladden, at once. Dick, you will excuse me, I have some private business on hand."

Wilson, who was rubbing Dame Meg's black muzzle and wondering what spiritual quicksilver had diffused itself in Jeffray's blood, looked hard at Richard, and warned him not to try his strength too greatly.

"You must keep an eye on your master, Gladden," he said, with a twinkle. "I thought we should have had him in a dead faint on the road this morning."

The butler was still standing in the porch, leaning forward slightly from the hips, with an expression of deferential concern on his colorless face.

"Dr. Sugg is in the garden, sir," he interposed. "Shall I tell him that you are tired or request him to wait till I have received your orders in the library."

Jeffray frowned and hesitated a moment.

"I will see the rector, Gladden," he said. "Attend me in the library in half an hour."

Wilson, who was pulling Dame Meg's ears, watched Jeffray go lightly along the terrace as though he had forgotten such trifles as fever, physics, and small-pox scars. The flushed alertness of Richard's face, his restless yet decisive manner, puzzled the painter not a little. It was as though he had drunk of some wonderful elixir since they had turned back from Thorney Chapel after the rustic wedding.

Jeffray, passing the warm walls and high gables of the house as the clock in the turret chimed twelve, went down from the terrace towards the green lawns and the flowering shrubberies, and saw Dr. Sugg, in the distance, holding a critical and

appreciative nose over his tulip beds and banks of gilliflower. The borders were gay under the glare of the sun, yet to Richard the red tulips recalled the blood-red flower that Bess had plucked at Holy Cross in her dream.

Sugg's jovial and ruddy face, with its apple cheeks and merry, black eyes, was turned towards Jeffray as he came down the box-edged path. His broad and humanistical mouth wreathed itself into a hearty smile as he held out both his hands to the squire.

"Thank Heaven, sir," he said, "that I find you looking so alive and well. I had heard less flattering accounts of you. I am rejoiced to see you so speedily recovered."

Jeffray's sympathies leaped out to this jovial old fellow with his twinkling eyes, and shrewd, smiling mouth.

"I am mending fast," he said, as he blushed and gripped the rector's hands; "and I am glad to see you, sir, at last. Stott has forbidden me visitors hitherto, as you know, but I can turn the tables on him now. How is Mary?—well, and untouched, eh?"

Sugg's face beamed heartily.

"Indeed, sir, Mary is Martha-like as ever. She sent you all her good wishes in my pocket. It is good to know that you are with us once more, Richard."

They turned by mutual and tacit consent towards the arbor of clipped yews that stood at the upper end of the gravel walk. The beds cut in the glistening, dew-drenched turf of the lawns were full of pansies and auriculas, whose gold-and-purple faces shone like rich enamels in the sun. The fountain below the terrace, a slim wood-nymph in the nude, was throwing spray from a cypress bough held above her head. Peacocks were sunning themselves upon the balustrades, and the white pigeons coquetted and basked on the red-tiled roof of the columbary.

The rector took out his snuffbox as they seated themselves in the arbor, and, after a proper and dignified amount of snuffing and dabbing, returned the tortoise-shell case reflectively to his waistcoat-pocket. The courtly expressions of sympathy with regard to Miss Hardacre's illness were duly forthcoming, and were met by Jeffray with all the sensibility and grace that he could muster. The rector laid his hat on the seat beside him, smoothed his wig, and approached Jeffray on the very subject that was filling the romanticist's heart.

"Will it tire you, sir," he said, "if I mention a matter to you that has much exercised my mind of late?"

Jeffray imagined that Sugg was for discussing the outbreak of small-pox in Rodenham and the necessity for keeping the pest-house in proper repair for the future. The rector nodded consentingly, but confessed to a more delicate and picturesque inspiration.

"Perhaps you may remember, sir," he said, "the girl, Bess Grimshaw, who caused you to come by a broken head in Pevensel?"

Jeffray shot a rapid glance at Dr. Sugg's face, and felt the blood rushing tumultuously to his cheeks.

"Yes, I remember her," he said, steadying himself. "The girl was not treated well in the hamlet, and, to be frank with you, I was sorry for her, and promised her help."

"So I understood, sir," quoth the rector, tersely.

Jeffray had moved to the end of the seat where he could lean against the hedge of yew. He felt himself trembling in most unmanly fashion, and was wondering whether his emotion was evident to the parson. Dr. Sugg's eyes appeared fixed reflectively on a distant tulip bed, and he sat with his hands together, his elbows resting on his knees.

"May I ask whether it is true, sir," he continued, "that you offered to give the girl a home at Rodenham?"

Jeffray's face was still afire. He had to steady himself before he could reply.

"That is the truth," he said, slowly, "and I have even been wondering whether Bess Grimshaw could have come to the priory while I was ill."

"She did come, sir," quoth Dr. Sugg, rubbing his hands together solemnly.

"Ah!"

"And when they frightened her away I took her in at the parsonage, for the poor lass had run away from home rather than marry a man whom she piously hated."

The rector turned suddenly and looked with perfect innocence into Jeffray's face. Its strained and restless expression startled the good man considerably, as did the dull gleam in the sunken eyes.

"I hope I am not vexing your infirmity, sir," he said, with some concern.

Jeffray, shaking himself free from his thoughts, met Sugg's stare with quiet composure.

"Rector," he said, "tell me all you know about this girl."

Sugg, pocketing his Christian curiosity for the moment, told Jeffray, very simply, how Bess had stopped to speak to him at the parsonage gate, how he had felt pity for her, and by Mary's advice taken her as a servant. He confessed his liking for poor Bess, and spoke with some heat of the way she had been ambuscaded and snatched away out of his house.

"Well, sir," said the rector, at the end of the recital, "I was not a little vexed by the rough handling the girl received. She was a handsome, well-spoken lass, and gracious and kind as could be to Mary. My daughter saw the whole thing, sir, and blubbered over it all night. But what could I do, sir? I had no authority over the young woman's person. I suppose by now they have forced her to marry that oaf of a cousin."

"I saw Bess married this morning," Jeffray said, quietly.

Dr. Sugg twitched his eyebrows.

"Indeed, sir—indeed!"

"Wilson and I were out driving and happened to turn down to Thorney Chapel. The wedding-party was coming out, and I suppose Mr. Mossop had been conducting the service. I can assure you, sir, that it was something of a shock to me."

The rector drummed on his knees with his right fist, and looked at Jeffray with a certain amount of puzzled sympathy. He was at loss to know why the master of Rodenham should feel himself so deeply concerned in the matter, nor was it usual for a young gentleman of birth to take a brotherly interest in a girl of Bess's station. The suspicion glimmered across the rector's mind that there might have been some unlawful passage of romance between the two, but he dismissed it as an insult to his belief in Jeffray's honor.

Richard himself had been touched by the reflection that Dr. Sugg might be concerned about his motives. Flushing at the thought, he marched out his forces boldly to the sound of the drum, like a general who is not ashamed either of his cause or of his men.

"Rector," he said, "I suppose there is nothing in the world so convincing as the truth. I tell you, as man to man, that I have felt very tenderly towards this girl, for she saved my life, sir, and has had much to bear. I hold that reverence for the purity of womanhood is a virtue more honorable than the giving of gold. Therefore, I was shocked at the thought that this young girl should be sacrificed to the unclean appetite of a coarse and loose-mouthed savage. The fellow filled her with dread and with disgust. That is why I strove to save her from this shame."

Sugg's round face beamed sympathetically.

"And by the ever-living prophets, sir, I shake your hand on it."

Jeffray's eyes had kindled.

"Moreover," he said, earnestly, "I believe that there is a secret connected with the girl's birth. She is no Grimshaw, or I am no gentleman. I know that she has recollections of another and distant past. I wanted to save her from this savage, but they have tricked her, and I am sorry."

The rector dived for his snuffbox and vented his feelings disguisedly therein.

"I agree with you, I agree with you, sir," he said, "she's a fine lass; the more's the pity, the more's the pity. God knows what will become of her in the future!"

"Sugg," said Jeffray, "I hope to save her yet."

When the rector had gone with a hearty grip of his muscular fist, Richard made his way to the library and found Peter Gladden waiting for him, suave and subservient. The tenor of the interview astonished the butler not a little. What had come to the young master that he looked so stern and masterful and spoke in a way that made poor Gladden's ears tingle?

XXVI

The white curtains with red roses flowered on them were half drawn over the windows of Miss Hardacre's bedroom. Miss Jilian's room smelled mildly of musk and lavender-water, and there were flowers in the vases upon the mantle-shelf and in the cream-colored Wedgwood bowl upon the French occasional table. The bed was spread with a red silk quilt, the turned-down sheets looking white as milk when contrasted with the expanse of red below. The panels on the walls were painted with garlands, cherubs' heads, and silly, fat Cupids straddling lambs. The door of the robe-cupboard was open, showing a hanging-garden of gowns.

On a couch by one of the windows lay Miss Jilian herself, wrapped in a pale-green bed-gown, red slippers on her feet, and one of Mr. Richardson's novels in her hands. Through the open window came the constant drone of the bees that were working the honeysuckle under the window-ledge. The monotonous clicking of a needle imitated the ticking of a death-scarab against the wainscoting. A little old woman in a white mob-cap and a black-stuff gown sat sewing at a little distance from the couch, her red-knuckled hands moving busily over the lace and linen in her lap. Every now and again her peering, short-sighted eyes would fix themselves with a mute, inquiring kindliness on Miss Hardacre's face, as though her thoughts were busy as her hands.

Alas for Miss Jilian's tawny fleece of hair! The golden masses had fallen to the shears, and nothing but a sharp, crisp aureole remained. On a little table beside the couch lay a black silk mask, a hand-mirror, a powder box and puff, and a rosewood case that told of Dutch pink and Chinese paints, lip-salves, wash-balls, and ointments scented with orange and with jessamine. Even these inanimate things gave a pathetic significance to the scene, hinting at the havoc disease had wrought upon poor Jilian's comeliness. The truth was evident enough to the most casual of glances. Angry pits disfiguring cheeks and forehead, eyes injected and inflamed, the lids red and half empty as to lashes.

It was plain that Mr. Richardson's sentimentalities tended rather to aggravate Miss Hardacre's troubles to herself. She laid down the book betimes, took up her glass, toyed with it awhile as though dreading its candor, and then compelled herself to snatch a glimpse at her own face. She frowned at the reflection, and put the glass aside with a gesture of impatience. Poor child, the chastening she was receiving seemed over-hard and malicious despite the fact that she had been courting bitterness by the cultivation of her own vanities. For Jilian, a month's sickness had changed the whole complexion of earth and of heaven. She had none of the comfortable religious spirit in her that creates a passive heroism out of the renunciation of her own comeliness. She was of the world, and loved every pretty

stitch and glistening gew-gaw and silken flower in its gay attire, and saw nothing in quiet sanctity that could recompense her soul.

The little old woman in black had been blinking her eyes and fidgeting with her work, while Miss Hardacre was suffering the ordeal of looking for the hundredth time at her own face. Jilian's own maid had refused to attend on her mistress at the very beginning of her illness, and old Mrs. Martha, who had handled both Lot and his sister in their infancy, had been brought from the cottage, where she had been pensioned, to nurse Jilian through the small-pox.

Mrs. Martha was unable to restrain the impatience of her loyalty and pride when Miss Hardacre's hand wavered once more towards the mirror. She jumped up very briskly for so shrivelled an old lady, toddled across the polished floor, snatched up the mirror, and plunged it into the pocket of her voluminous apron.

"The good Lord knows, my dear," she said, with the affectionate familiarity of an old servant—"the good Lord knows why you should be for making yourself vaporish and miserable with this paltry bit of glass! You should forget to look into a mirror, my dear, and in a month you won't be so much afraid of your own pretty face. I've seen ladies as have had the small-pox before, haven't I? And very decent faces they managed to keep after it, though I'll warrant they were more like plum dumplings afore the pock-marks healed."

Jilian lay back looking piteously about the mouth, as though she were trying not to believe a word of what this silly old woman said. Mrs. Martha had toddled back to her chair with the air of a grandmother who has done her duty by a peevish child.

"I hope you may be right, Martha," said Miss Hardacre, miserably; "to be sure I look ugly enough now to make Mr. Richard go off into a faint."

Mrs. Martha seated herself in her chair with solid precision. She fingered her work irritably, and continued her declaiming as though some imaginary person were threatening her constantly with contradictions.

"And I should like to know who Mr. Richard Jeffray is, to give himself airs before a Hardacre of Hardacre? His grandfather was an 'iron man,' as we all know, I reckon; he made his money by turning the country-side upside down, and cutting down all the trees. And hasn't Mr. Jeffray been down with the small-pox himself, and didn't he give it to you, sure; for you must have had it of him, my dear, or I never heard Parson Jessel read the Bible. As for your purty face, my dear, it'll just mend superb with all the fine stuffs you may be using in that there box. And the hair always grows stronger, like a tree, for being pruned. And maybe Mr. Jeffray may be worse off than you in the matter of scars."

Jilian looked round the room wearily, her eyes resting at last on the tulips and jonquils in the blue bowl, an offering from Rodenham. The old woman had uttered many of the thoughts in her busy, cackling way that had been moving in Miss Hardacre's brain itself. Had not Jeffray given her the disease, and was it not his duty to be all the more tender and sympathetic in consequence? Jilian almost hoped that

he had been more disfigured than herself so that his senses should have no cause to boast. And then, after all, her face would be fairer to look upon when her hair had grown and the red pock-marks had paled.

"So you have heard, Martha," she asked, "of other ladies losing their scars?"

The old woman moistened her lips with a sharp and viperish tongue.

"I mind Lady Hankinson a-taking of the small-pox, my dear. She was a mighty fine woman in her day, and kept my lord in order with her looks. Well, she had the gentlemen round her like flies at the routs, just as much as ever. She wasn't quite so smooth and creamy, my dear, but she was a fine lady with as fine a pair of eyes as ever made a man feel hot as a live coal. And she had a figure, too; one of them big, duchessy-looking ladies she was, as would make you think as they'd need extra webbing in their beds."

Jilian smiled more optimistically, and, taking a fan from the table, spread its painted sticks and seemed inclined to rehearse some of her charming affectations.

"The small-pox can't spoil a gentlewoman's figure, Martha," she said.

"Don't you fret, my dear. Men like a slim waist and a plump bosom. And there ain't a lady in Sussex with hair like yours. And your nose is there with a purty eye peeping out like a jewel on either side, and a little red mouth below it as any gentleman would be proud to kiss. Don't you fret yourself about young Mr. Jeffray, my dear."

And Jilian, finding herself cheered and inspirited by the old woman's flattering assertions, became ready as we all are to believe those things which are pleasant to the heart.

Much the same problem was discussed that night by Sir Peter and Mr. Lancelot as they drank their punch, with the ancestral faces peering down at them gravely from the walls. The light from the candles in their silver stands glimmered on the polished table that shone like brown water. The casements were open, the heavy red curtains undrawn, and a nightingale was singing in the shrubbery below the terrace. The punch-bowl, with its green dragons and blue mandarins, steamed near Sir Peter's portly paunch. Mr. Lot slouched in his chair as usual, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets and a clay pipe hanging out of the corner of his mouth. He smiled very shrewdly at his father from time to time, chuckled, and delivered himself of some forcible and oracular remarks.

"I take it that you had better see the lad," quoth the baronet, as he ladelled out another glass of punch. "You can see what temper he shows, Lot, whether he's inclined to shy or not."

Mr. Lancelot twisted his mouth into an expressive pucker, and appeared inspired by a sense of his own cleverness.

"I'll snaffle him, sir," he said.

"Poor Jill's a deuced fright, but for God's sake, boy, don't tell her I said so."

“She’ll wipe the spots out a bit in time. Give the girl a chance.”

Sir Peter grunted laboriously, and unfastened the lower buttons of his waistcoat. His mottled face appeared heavy and lugubrious despite his frequent reversions to the punch-bowl and his confidence in his son’s astuteness.

“It’s deuced hard luck on the wench, Lot,” he said; “and Richard gave her the ugly face, there’s no denying it.”

“I’ll rub that truth into him, sir, never fear.”

“He’s a nice, gentle lad.”

“Richard wants stroking the right way, sir, and taking on the high poetic horse. He’s a man of sentiment, and he’ll swallow the stuff like senna, and thrive on it, by gad! I know my mount, sir,” and Mr. Lot laid a fat forefinger along his nose.

“Well, well,” said the baronet, reflectively, “I don’t want the lass jilted again; we’ve had enough of it before. And Dick Jeffray’s a pleasant lad with a useful pot of money to his name.”

“Don’t I know the color of a guinea, sir?” quoth Mr. Lot, with a thick laugh.

It may easily be gathered that Richard Jeffray was soon favored with a state visit from Mr. Lancelot Hardacre. Richard had been dreading some such interview not a little, even as a sensitive spirit dreads contact with the boisterous, blustering, physical barbarian. Richard’s revulsion from the responsibilities he had created for himself in the past had waxed tenfold in strength since his discovery of Bess’s shame. His sense of bondage chafed his pride, the more so, perhaps, because he was honest enough to acknowledge the truth of his obligation.

There was always a suggestion of patronage in Mr. Lot’s manner that presupposed his cousin to be but half a man. It was so that morning when he dismounted before the priory porch. The genial swagger of the man, the glare of his red coat, the crunching of his heavy boots upon the gravel inspired Jeffray with an instinctive antagonism. Mr. Lot had squeezed his cousin’s hand heartily enough and rallied him upon his looks. They walked the terrace together, for Richard had gone out to meet Lancelot at the porch.

There was nothing in Mr. Hardacre’s manner at first to betray the fact that he carried a possible declaration of war in his pocket. It was his policy to assume with the most glaring good-humor that Richard was thirsting to see Miss Jilian, even though she might appear red and disfigured about the face.

“We can’t cool your fever just yet, Richard,” he said, after an exchange of cousinly courtesies. “Poor Jill has had it rather bad, you know, and looks a bit weak about the eyes as yet. But, Lor’, when a young fellow’s in love, a pimple or two makes precious little difference.”

Lot showed his teeth, stared, and nudged Jeffray meaningly with his elbow. Their familiarity appeared complete; nevertheless, his cousin did not expand in the sun of Mr. Hardacre’s confidence. There was a compressed look about his mouth, a suggestion of sullenness in his eyes. All these genialities only exaggerated his

aversion. He was no longer the lad whom Lot had bullied and teased of old, and his cousin's loud patronage made his stiffening individuality revolt. His heart was afire for Bess at the moment, and she seized on the pity that should have been Jilian's.

"I am vexed that your sister has been ill," he said, speaking with sensible effort and with but little flow of feeling.

Mr. Lot stiffened at the remark. His blue eyes seemed to grow more prominent, as though the cold steadiness of Jeffray's manner had put him suddenly on the alert.

"You will have to come and comfort Jill," he said, staring hard at Richard, as though to watch for any betrayal of rebellion.

"Certainly, Lot, as soon as she will see me."

"She had it of you, you know, cousin; you will have to make it up to her for a damaged complexion."

Richard shuddered at the coarse suggestiveness of Lot's words. There was something in his cousin's manner that made him see of a sudden how cunningly the Lady Letitia had forecasted the future. Jilian's comeliness had suffered, and the Hardacres were prepared to hold him like a culprit to his oath.

"I can promise you, cousin," he said, bluntly, "that I shall not fail in doing my duty."

There was an unconscious tinge of irony in the retort that penetrated Mr. Hardacre's skin. He reddened a little, thrust out his lower lip, and looked at Jeffray with sinister shrewdness.

"Duty, sir; that is a damned poor word for a lover to use!"

Jeffray flushed.

"I meant it in the honorable sense, Lot," he said, more kindly.

"Egad, sir, I should hope so," quoth the fire-eater, thrusting his chin forward over his cravat. "You gave my sister the small-pox, sir, and if you are anything of a fellow you will behave decently to her and not from any confounded sense of duty. I am right there, Richard, I reckon."

Jeffray, feeling humiliated, shackled, yet inwardly rebellious, looked his cousin full in the face, and gave him his answer frankly and with some heat.

"I am a gentleman, Lot, and therefore you may spare your hectoring."

"Deuce take you, sir; I suppose I may feel for my sister, eh?"

The two men were eying each other like dogs half inclined to fight.

"At present, sir," quoth Jeffray, reddening and throwing back his head, "your sister's honor is in my keeping."

Lot Hardacre stared at him in silence for a moment. He was wondering how Jeffray had come by so much spirit as to stand up to a man who had always bustled him.

"Well, that's spoken like a man," he confessed.

“Jilian and I are betrothed, are we not?”

“By gad, you are.”

“Then, sir, I am not conscious of having given you any excuse as yet to question my honor.”

XXVII

The rebel spirit is quickly astir when a man's in love, and so it was with Jeffray after his sparring with Mr. Lot. That gentleman's red-visaged and swaggering hauteur had irritated Richard not a little, and he was in no temper to be driven at the sword's-point to the altar. Already he was waxing world-wise enough to recognize the truth that Mr. Lot was ready to presume upon his supposed timidity. The suspicion awoke a sense of resistance in Jeffray, an instinctive feeling of antagonism that was only human. Left to his own sensitive and generous impulses, he would probably have found no great difficulty in bringing himself before Miss Jilian's feet. Her brother's threatening interference checked the free flow of pity, and made Richard Jeffray recoil and consider the future for himself.

He was still in a fever about Bess, and unable to bear with any calmness the thought of her sacrifice to the lewd cunning of her cousin. Jeffray felt that his word had been pledged to the girl, pledged for her honor's sake, and that he had failed through circumstance to keep his pledge. The bond was as real to him as his betrothal to Miss Hardacre, and far more real in the matter of romance. On the one hand, he recognized a perfunctory and half-pitying sense of duty; on the other, all the passionate chivalry that had lain latent till now within his heart.

Why should he not desire to befriend the girl in her trouble? Was there any dishonor in the desire, and need the world know how much tenderness must needs be locked and hidden in his heart? He would not make love to her or court her love in turn. And yet was it not possible that he might succor her in her distress, comfort her, lighten her lot a little? He might even protect her from Dan's brutality, should that savage give him a reasonable and an honorable excuse. Bess was married. So far there was an impenetrable barrier between them. He could not break the gate of fate, but he might touch her hands between the bars.

Nothing was more natural, therefore, to such philosophy than that Jeffray should signalize his return to the saddle by a pilgrimage through Pevensel in quest of Bess. The brisk delight of a canter over the purpling moors was itself a joy to a man who had been three weeks abed. How the larks sang, and how the broom flashed and glittered in the wind! The cloud galleons bellied out their white sails over the crests of the downs. The diverse greens, checkering the landscape, seemed dusted with gold-dust by the daughters of the dawn. The day brought back to him the warm, romantic splendor of the south, the memory of Sicilian skies and the isles of Greece, a-dream in the blue Ægean.

Richard rode down to the weir-pool, and found no life there save a heron standing in the shallows, the bird rising on its heavy wings and flapping away above the trees. He crossed at the ford and rode in and out among the ruins, scanning the

ivied windows and searching behind the crumbling piers that were bearded with ferns. No Bess was there, though the very grasses seemed to smell of the sweet woodland odor of her clothes. Jeffray came into the refectory that was rendered the more mysterious by her dream, but found no red flower blooming, no swarthy girl waiting to lift up her face to his.

He abandoned Holy Cross at last, but loitered at the pool a moment. The water lay like glass above the curling cornice that thundered down into the crackling foam below. The grass-land was ablaze with gold, deep, dewy, the grass-land of a dream. Jeffray was wondering within himself whether he should take the path that led up towards the hamlet, in the hope that Bess might be coming to the ruins. Crossing the ford again, he plunged upward into the woods, not guessing at the moment that his heart's desire was very near.

It was at the winding down of the path into a little dell in the midst of a larch-wood that Richard, with a sudden leap of the heart, saw a streak of color coming amid the trees. The tall, stiff trunks crowded all around the dell that lay like a green bowl under the vaultings of the boughs above. Wild hyacinths spread a blue mist over the lush, green grass, and a few late wind-flowers were scattered like snow-flakes under the trees.

Jeffray had reined in instinctively. Bess was coming down the path, walking with her head bowed down, breaking a dead bough in pieces between her hands. She wandered aimlessly from side to side, as though life had little purpose for her now. A red scarf covered her shoulders and was knotted over her bosom, her brown neck bare, the black masses of her hair shining in the sunlight, an errant strand or two falling down each cheek.

Jeffray's black mare tossed her head, the rattling of the bit and bridle causing Bess to start and look up rapidly. She had come to a place where the knotted roots of a fir ran across the path, the ground falling away on the farther side and making a species of rough dais. She stood motionless, leaning forward slightly, her eyes fixed on Jeffray with wondering steadfastness. For a moment they looked at each other, with no sound to break the silence save the soughing of the wind in the tree-tops overhead.

Jeffray dismounted, left the mare loose, and went slowly towards Bess. Her eyes were still fixed steadily on his, yet she seemed to quail a little and grow pale as he drew near to her. Richard could see her trembling excitement, her hands opening and shutting spasmodically as she stood above him in all the swarthy splendor of her loveliness.

"Bess."

She gave a sudden, low cry, twisted away from him, and, throwing her arms up against the trunk of the fir, leaned against it with her cheek against the rough, brittle bark. Jeffray's hands fell limp to his sides. He stood looking at Bess helplessly, as though shocked and baffled by her deep distress, knowing not for the moment what to do or say.

It was not long before she seemed to master herself, and, falling aside from the trunk of the tree, turned a dull and almost sullen face to his.

“I did not think I should see you to-day,” she said, with monotonous steadiness.

Richard, hot and cold by turns, watched her earnestly.

“I came to try and find you, Bess,” he answered.

“Find me!”

There was an indescribable ring of self-scorn in her voice, though she carried her head more bravely and labored less with her breathing.

“Am I worth finding, Mr. Jeffray?”

“I have been much troubled for your sake, Bess.”

She flashed a wonderful look at him, her eyes lighting up like water in the sun. It was sympathy she needed, and the flow of a friend’s words.

“Ah, you are very good to me,” she said.

“I gave you a promise; I failed to keep it, and I am sorry.”

Jeffray stood like a man confessing his dishonor, for the girl’s self-shame had shaken him, and her eyes were fixed upon his face. She stepped down with sudden noiselessness and stood close to Jeffray, bending towards him a little.

“I know,” she said, hurriedly. “Yes, you were ill; you could not help me; it was no fault of yours. You would have helped me, yes; I know that, and—and I thank you.”

She hung her head again, and swung away from him with a look of miserable and overpowering shame. Her eyes were dull and tearless, her mouth bitter and very sullen. Jeffray stretched out his hand and touched her arm.

“Bess.”

She turned her head and looked at him with longing, the color rising to her face.

“Bess, I can’t bear it, this misery of yours. I heard all after I saw you at Thorney Chapel. They tricked you, Dan and Isaac together. It should have been otherwise had I not been in bed.”

A peculiar light kindled in the girl’s eyes. It seemed born of wonder, of incredulity, and some subtle and uprushing joy. Was her shame bitter, then, to this earnest-faced man, so bitter that it could make him stammer, grow fierce, and look at her in a way that made her whole body tingle? Warmth seemed to spread from her heart, up through her brown neck, through all her flesh till she felt alive to the eyes that gazed at hers.

“Mr. Richard—”

“Yes.”

She drooped a little towards him, her hands hanging passive, her lips growing full and tender again, her eyes losing all their thick and sullen thoughtfulness.

“I have been very miserable. I had one joy left to me—”

“Bess.”

“The hope that I might see—see you—again. Yes, every day, every day when I could escape from Dan, I have come down through the woods to Holy Cross.”

Jeffray was standing with his head thrown back, his eyes fixed on Bess’s face. She moved still nearer to him, speaking hurriedly, passionately, as though afraid that he might stay her words.

“Yes, they took me away. I fought, but they were too strong for me. Dan had tried to bring me to shame, and I had run away—to you—to save me. And then, and then—you can see—you can understand—”

She threw up her arm with a great catching of her breath and covered her face. Jeffray, feeling like a man who has drunk of the wine of the immortals, held out both his hands to her with a hoarse cry.

“Bess. Listen to me. Before God—I want to help you.”

She rocked to and fro a moment, then dropped her arm, and looked at him with an almost childish trust.

“I must see you again, see you—soon.”

“Where?”

“Not at Holy Cross, no, it is too near. There is the Hermit’s Rock in the yew valley—above Thorney Chapel—”

Jeffray had straightened up with the air of a man ready to march with a forlorn hope.

“I know it,” he said.

“It is a wild place. I can fool Dan. I will be patient.”

She seemed to be plotting it all with all the passionate and ready ardor of her heart. To Jeffray even this perilous and solemn complicity was very sweet. His reason appeared to have been heated to white heat and cooled again like a tempered sword to serve him.

She looked at him dearly, as though he held all the warmth and light that life could give.

“I will ride to the yew valley every evening—till—”

“Till?”

“You can come.”

A great sigh escaped her. She drooped her face nearer to his, her lips apart, her eyes shining.

“I shall come,” she said.

XXVIII

Meanwhile, Richard received a sealed and perfumed note from Miss Jilian bidding him visit her at last at Hardacre. Jeffray, who felt cold and reluctant when he read the letter, did not guess how much plotting and planning, how many fears and heart-searchings had been squandered over that simple sheet of paper. Poor Jilian had been pressed by Lot to send for Jeffray before her inclination was mature. She had desired to wait till her face was fairer, but her Ulysses of a brother willed it otherwise, being suspicious of Richard's faith. He argued that it would be better for the lad to see Jilian soon and be impressed by the trouble he had brought on her. Jeffray was an amiable fellow with a wealth of sentiment in his blood. And then when Miss Hardacre's looks improved, as improve they would, her cousin might be so charmed with the change as to fall in love with the betterment of the bargain. There would have been much wisdom in Lot's strategy had he not been ignorant of the subtle undercurrent in the romance. He counted on his cousin's impressionable good-nature, and he might have counted on it with some confidence but for the existence of Bess of the Woods.

It was as unpropitious a moment as fate could have found for thrusting him back upon his allegiance to poor Jilian.

Miss Hardacre had spent two hours at her toilet that morning, and had warred with nature to the best of her ability. She had crimped her short aureole of hair, daubed her cheeks, salved her lips, and used pearl powder for her neck and arms. She wore a green gown that morning covered with red carnations, a red silk hoop, and a band of black velvet about her throat. In the dusk she might have passed for a comely woman, but the full glare of day dissolved the dream.

Jilian chose the red parlor for the receiving of her betrothed, since the coloring of the room was red, damask curtains tempering the white light and diffusing a glow over her face. Seated on a high-backed chair before the harpsichord, she let her fingers idle over the keys, while she listened every now and again for the sound of hoofs on the gravel space before the house. It was a little before noon when she heard the clangor of hoofs passing under the gate-tower into the paved court-yard. To ease her nervousness and the sense of tightness over her heart, she broke into a ditty from the "Beggar's Opera," her eyes brightening with the fever of waiting. She heard Lot's voice rising from the hall below, the sound of footsteps on the stairs, a quiet knocking at the door. The handle rattled. Pushing back the chair, she stood up, trembling, her hands opening and closing, her lips dry. She saw Jeffray standing on the threshold, one hand on his sword-hilt, the other holding the lappet of his coat.

"Richard!"

Unconsciously, Jilian had put all the strained self-shame of her poor soul into

the cry. She took two steps forward, holding out her hands. Jeffray closed the door slowly, like a man seeking to compose his thoughts. He turned and looked at Jilian. Unwittingly, in her agitation, she had taken her stand where a sunbeam slanted full upon her face, disclosing all its seamed and pitted ugliness with a brilliance that was almost brutal.

A woman's eyes are quick in piecing together the emotions on a man's face. She saw Jeffray start, saw him catch his breath, saw the critical yet instinctive repulsion in his eyes. He appeared to conquer himself by an effort, yet the smile he gave her was soulless and unreal. She said nothing as he came forward, bent, and kissed her hand.

"Richard, mon cher, and are you glad to see me?"

She spoke very softly to him, as she turned aside and walked a little unsteadily to a settle standing by the harpsichord. Jeffray felt a great flush of shame and a miserable sense of reluctance that made him gauche and clumsy. He followed her as though under compulsion, and sat down beside her on the settle.

"Of course I am glad to see you, Jilian," he said.

Miss Hardacre's hands were fidgeting in her lap. She had prepared a gay and airy part, but all her brave impudence and coquetry seemed to have deserted her. She was too conscious of her ugliness; the inspiration of vanity was dead within her. The pretty puppet could no longer ply her fan, flash her gray eyes, simper, and show her teeth. She seemed to realize of a sudden that courteous pity alone could make a man look kindly at her face. Jeffray's first stare had told her that.

"I have been very ill, Richard," she said, almost humbly, looking at him a moment as for sympathy, and then lowering her eyes.

Jeffray was sitting very stiffly on the settle, looking like a man who had been offered a cup of poison or the renunciation of his faith.

"I know; I am sorry; it was all my fault," he answered her.

There was a lack of tone and of vitality about the reply that made Jilian shrink.

"I am not what I was, Richard," she said, pressing her handkerchief against her lips and leaving a vermilion stain on the cambric; "no doubt you find me greatly changed."

Her eyes challenged him with the shallow despair of a vain woman. Jeffray reddened, and could not meet her look as he stammered out feeble contradictions.

"You are not recovered yet, Jilian, and Lot hinted that I might find you a little changed. I am sorry; believe me, I am. Why, you don't look so pale as I expected, nor yet so thin. We shall soon have you well and handsome again, and all the women round about will be for envying you."

It was a poor and jerky apology enough, and Miss Hardacre was not for one moment deceived by it. The boy was shocked, disgusted, even as she had feared he would be, and no doubt he was wondering how he could marry such a painted hag.

Jilian imagined that she understood the whole of Jeffray's heart, and that he shrank from her just as the rest of the world might shrink. From humiliation her mood turned suddenly towards impatience, and from impatience to reproachful bitterness.

"It is very hard, Richard," she said, keeping her eyes fixed upon her satin slippers.

"Hard, Jilian?"

She flashed up petulantly, her eyes beginning to glitter.

"To be sure, I am ugly now, an old fright; I shall never be pretty again. Don't deny it, Richard; I saw it all in your eyes from the first moment. Yes, I am ugly, and very miserable, and it is hard and bitter and cruel. I am beginning to hate myself just as everybody else will hate me."

Jeffray hung his head, looked as ashamed and contrite as though every word accused him of dishonor. Yet for the life of him he could not forget Bess Grimshaw's face, the scent of her clothes, the glimmer of her hair. The generous hypocrisies died unuttered on his tongue. His sincerity grappled him; he was sorry for Jilian, but he could not do his pity justice.

"It is all my fault," he said, dejectedly.

Miss Hardacre's fingers were crushing her handkerchief into a ball. The interview was proving too bitter to her, and she was beginning to revolt against Jeffray's apathy. Why did he not try to comfort her? She would never have believed that Richard had so hard a heart.

"You are very cold, cousin," she said.

Jeffray blushed, and looked almost afraid to meet her eyes.

"Of course, men change. They only care for a pretty face, and love only so long as the woman pleases them. Is not that so, Richard?"

"For God's sake, Jilian, don't talk like this—"

"Yes, yes, that is very well, but can I—a woman—help seeing the truth?"

Jeffray drew a deep breath and leaned back against the harpsichord.

"I know it is all my fault," he said, "and I am very miserable over what has happened. Leave me alone a moment, and let me take it all in. I am just as unhappy as you are, Jilian; it is no use my pretending that I do not see the change in you."

Jeffray, full of the egotism of a man in love, could not have spoken more biting words. Jilian started as though he had struck her, rose up from the settle with a sudden dignity and restraint that made Richard appear wholly in the wrong. She made him a slight courtesy, turned on her heel, and walked towards the door.

"To be sure, you must think it over, cousin," she said, with a vicious sneer; "remember that I am ugly, and remember also that you have told me so."

"Jilian!"

"Think it over, sir, but do not imagine that I am going to be thrown aside like a

soiled shoe. I have more pride, more conceit, than that. No, I have no wish to have all the women jeering and laughing behind my back. You understand me, Richard, eh? Very good. Think it over, by all means, but remember that we are betrothed."

"I have not forgotten it, Jilian."

"Very good, cousin. I will excuse you from the discomfort of studying my ugliness any further to-day. Sir Peter and Lot will be glad to see you to dinner."

When Jeffray left Hardacre House that afternoon, after enduring a somewhat embarrassing interview with Sir Peter and Mr. Lot, he was filled with mingled feelings of recklessness and shame. He almost detested Jilian for her reproachful bitterness and her threats, forgetting to pity her now that she had shown the will to govern him. Moreover, Lancelot, who had seen his sister in one of the galleries after her meeting with Richard, had treated his cousin with ominous and threatening courtesy. Three months ago Jeffray would have blushed crimson at the thought of wounding the sensibilities of his kinsfolk. Any suggestion of personal dishonor that his conscience might then have flung at him would have brought him to the penitential kissing of Miss Jilian's hands. Now, the swarthy splendor of a single face had blinded him to all else as a great light blinds the eyes. He hated Sir Peter, he hated Lancelot, he hated his old self, he almost hated Jilian. Was he not to see Bess that very evening? Was not Pevensel before him with all its mystery, its glamour, its romance?

But Jeffray did not find Bess in the valley of yews that evening. She had been unable to escape Dan's vigilance and had bided at home, hoeing the weeds in the garden sullenly. As for Richard, he rode back to Rodenham very sad and weary, and feeling sick and faint as though he had overtaxed his strength.

XXIX

Surgeon Stott, that blue-coated member of the company of surgeons, pounced upon Jeffray next morning, and delivered a most professional condemnation of his patient's method of convalescence.

"Too much riding—too much riding, sir, eh? Hardacre House yesterday; fourteen miles there and back! Not very gentle exercise, to be sure."

Richard Jeffray had the mopes that morning, and Stott fully believed that he knew the cause thereof. He sniffed, pulled out his gold repeater, and sat with his head cocked on one side as he held Jeffray's wrist between his thumb and fat, pink fingers.

"I am going to order you to The Wells, sir," he said, bluntly.

"The Wells!"

"Yes, for the good of both parties. Pardon the suggestion, but ladies need time for proper and reasonable convalescence. Let there be an interlude, Mr. Jeffray; I recommend it as a man of sentiment."

Jeffray caught the surgeon's meaning, and discovered himself not so very prejudiced against the proposal, in that it offered him time for procrastinating with the future. He had had but little sleep the previous night, with Jilian's scarred face haunting him and her patheticisms and her sneers ringing changes in his brain. He experienced an almost fierce desire to escape for a while from the importunate responsibilities of the present.

"Very probably, Stott, the change would do me good," he said.

"Certainly, sir, certainly; pack your books away, and leave the thinking part of you at home. That is my advice—take it or leave it, as you like."

Jeffray flattered the surgeon by acknowledging his authority, and by straightway deciding to join the Lady Letitia at The Wells for one month. He was glad of the excuse to commend himself to Jilian by letter, pleading ill-health and Surgeon Stott's advice. He imagined that his absence might prepare Miss Hardacre for a possible parting, and at least he would gain leisure to face the future calmly and without haste.

He rode out that same evening, and found Bess in the valley of yews, a dusky fiord that ran from the green levels about Thorney Chapel into the towering gloom of Pevensel. Hundreds of yews were crowded about piled-up rocks that looked like the broken towers and battlements of a ruin. A path ran amid the trees, leading to a little glade where a pool covered with the white stars of the water-crowfoot glimmered before the old, rock-cut hermitage.

She started up on seeing him, the blood in her cheeks, sunlight in her eyes.

Jeffray was as red as Bess, the sense of her nearness adding the charm of strangeness to the meeting.

"So you have found your way?"

She held out her hands, and Jeffray took them, brown and rough-skinned as they were. They seemed to smell of new mown hay and milk to him, and of the pots of musk that grow in cottage windows.

"I rode here last night, but you did not come."

"No, I could not get free from Dan."

They stood looking at each other awhile in silence, as though letting the subtle consciousness of love steal in upon their hearts. All about them the brown trunks of the yews broke into sheaves of dusky pinnacles and slender spires. The silence of the place was as the silence of some sacred wood. The grass grew green and deep in the glade, while the thickets above seemed dusted with lapis lazuli, so thick were the bluebells.

Bess seated herself on a stone beside the pool, Jeffray lying in the grass at her feet. The happy abandonment of children was theirs, for the sordidness of life seemed far from them for the moment. Bess's eyes darkened a little when Jeffray told her of Surgeon Stott's warning to him that morning, but there was no distrust upon her face. Stott's month at The Wells was dwindling to vanishing point in Jeffray's mind as he talked to Bess, and watched the play of feeling on her face.

It was then that Bess spoke for the first time to Jeffray of Miss Hardacre. She had thought often of the great lady in her silks and brocades queening it in the stately house guarded by its ancestral trees. Bess wished to hear Jeffray speak of this woman whom he was to marry, and to watch his eyes to see whether they lit up like a lover's eyes.

Jeffray's face and mood changed on the instant; he was no longer the dreamer watching the sun sinking behind the yews.

"Why do you ask me about Miss Hardacre?"

Bess saw that the thought was bitter to him, and yet felt glad at heart.

"I know," she said, slowly, "you are to marry her."

"Who told you that?"

"Miss Sugg, before—"

"Before you married Dan?"

"Yes."

Jeffray turned, and leaned upon one hand, looking at the pool and the reflection of the sky that colored the water.

"Did you believe it?" he asked her, quietly.

"Yes, I had to."

"What did you think?"

“I thought it wonderful that you should have been so kind to me.”

Jeffray plucked at the long grass with his hands, and laughed, and the note of bitterness in his laughter made her understand all that was hidden in his heart.

“You were generous to me, Bess,” he said, grimly; “and how often I have hated myself, you cannot tell. Still, child—” and he looked up at her with brightening eyes —“it is not for me to put the weight upon your shoulders. I do not know whether I shall marry this fine lady. Let us forget her to-night, you and I.”

He might have told Bess that he hated Jilian, for her woman’s instinct had seized the truth, a secret joy finding rebellion easy in her heart. Jeffray had no love for the woman he was to marry, a confession that Bess had almost hoped to hear. She felt now that she could lean on Jeffray, and look perhaps for a more mysterious thing than pity.

Bess understood but vaguely what the future might devise. It was sufficient for her to know that Jeffray’s thoughts were hers and not Miss Hardacre’s. A great barrier seemed to have been beaten down between them, and she felt happier that night than she had felt for many days. They talked on as the twilight gathered, like children beside a deep and treacherous river, the one bank rich with sunshine, the other a chaos of light and shade. As yet they would not dare the deeps. Sufficient unto the hour was their joy in each other’s presence.

When the twilight deepened, Bess went away through the solemn yews, smiling to herself over the new hope born within her heart, while Jeffray rode back like one in a dream through the darkening thickets, and the long, odorous grass towards his home. Before noon next day he had shaken Dick Wilson by the hand, and was travelling over the heavy Sussex roads, Peter Gladden wondering why his master looked so sad.

The night after Bess’s meeting with Jeffray in the yew valley, Dan told his wife that he was going out after wild duck to the Holy Cross pools, and, shouldering his gun, left Bess alone to go to bed. The sky was clear, with a full moon swinging up in the east above the tangled boughs of the pines. Dan slipped away to old Isaac’s cottage with his black spaniel at his heels, and, keeping under the shadows of the orchard, knocked at the heavy door. A candle was burning in the lower room, the pewter and china, the brass work, and quaint furniture showing through the curtainless window. A figure rose up from an arm-chair before the fire, stopped a moment by the table to snuff the candle. Then the bolts were shot back, and Isaac’s white head came peering out into the moonlight. He had a lantern in one hand and a canvas-bag in the other, while with a keen glance at Dan he jerked his head in the direction of an out-house standing in the garden.

“Get the pick and spade, lad.”

Isaac slammed the door after him by the bobbin-cord, and waited by the garden-gate while Dan groped in the shed for the tools. Finding them at last, he swung the spade and pick over one shoulder, and carried the gun sloped over the other. They

set off together in the moonlight and took a southward path that plunged into the deeps of Pevensel.

Bess was creaming the milk in the little dairy next morning when Dan came in to her, grinning and looking good-humored. His clumsy shoes were foul with muck from the byre, his shirt open, showing his hairy chest. He hugged Bess, flattening his coarse lips on her cheek, the girl taking the kiss with dull-eyed self-restraint.

"I've got a present for ye, Bess."

The wife kept her color and looked calmly at her husband.

"Ay, and a purty one. You shall be giving me three smacks for it. Come, fetch a glimpse."

He fumbled in his pocket, his eyes fixed the while on the girl's face. Bess saw a scrap of gold in his palm, green stones shining like a dog's eyes in the light. Dan chuckled, his hairy and sweating chest heaving. He held the brooch out to her.

"There's a purty bauble! A flash bit of stuff! How be you liking it, Bess?"

She took it from Dan's palm, and, as by instinct, pinned it on the red handkerchief that covered her bosom. The man's clumsy courting reminded her by contrast of Richard Jeffray. She hated her husband's sweating bulk and the stare of his eyes.

"I like it well enough, Dan," she said.

"Now don't you be for asking questions. Give me the kisses, wench. Lud, but I like ye; I like every limb and tooth of ye, Bess."

Dan kissed her twice, though she shuddered as his hairy arms crushed her against his chest. When Dan had gone she shook her clothes as though to rid them of the scent of him, and dashed water from the pump into her face. Then she took the brooch, and, standing before the lattice-window with the great beams dark overhead, gazed at it a long while, holding it in the hollow of her hand.

A rush of strange memories had flooded back into her brain, dim and tantalizing, yet full of meaning. This was the brooch she remembered at the throat of the tall lady who had run to comfort her when she had fallen and cut her knees as a little child. How had Dan come by it? To whom had it belonged?

XXX

Jeffray had taken lodgings at Tunbridge Wells over a stationer's shop, Peter Gladden, pompously indefatigable, having discharged all the petty preliminaries for his master. The windows of the parlor gave a slanting view of the Pantiles, and a broad glimpse of the common, gilded with gorse, its may-trees bursting into snow, the rocks sleeping like toads on the sunny slopes. The woods of Eridge bristled beyond, and Crowborough Beacon climbed purple into the south-western sky. The village with its biblically-named hills seemed gay with spruce gentlemen, beflowered ladies, lackeys, and such gaudy beetles. The frivolous little Sybaris nestled amid the dazzling freshness of spring, orchards still white upon the slopes, flowers thick in every meadow.

It was a dewy morning after rain, the landscape a-shimmer in the sun when Peter Gladden shaved and valeted his master, and prepared him for a parade upon the Pantiles and the public walks where he might study the life of the place. Jeffray, who still wore black and dressed without great respect to fashion, discovered himself scrutinized with some closeness by the smart idlers whose lives appeared consecrated to studying the shape of a buckle or the cock of a hat.

Jeffray sat down on a seat in the public walk and watched the people go to and fro. A strutting, waddling crowd it was, picturesque at a distance, with its brocades and colors, but, like a bold and splashing picture, disclosing its artifices and its flaws to the close observer. The men, with a few signal exceptions, appeared to belong to that indefinable order of beings who combined the semi-sentimental spirit of libertinism with the coarse arrogance of an aristocratic animal. What thrusting out of elbows was there; what delicate dabbings of the nose with lace; what strutting and smirking; what showing off of legs and gesturings with white ruffled hands! It was a clever crowd, too, with the exception of a few clumsy squires who lumbered through it, and the open-mouthed toadies gaping and ready like stupid codfish for "my lord's joke." Shallow and superficial seemed the gay, epigrammatic philosophy of such people. Jeffray felt that fashion was justified of her children, and that even the pageantry of life could not make such mumming bearable.

At three o'clock Jeffray dined at a quiet "ordinary" preparatory to paying a state call on the Lady Letitia. He took his meal in a little white-fronted inn whose casements opened on trim lawns, fruit-trees, and white palings. The beds cut in the grass were bright with pansies, stocks, and arabis. A broad brick path led up to the trellised porch.

Even in this quaint, black-beamed old place the same feeling of artificiality haunted him. The bobbing, scurrying waiter was a servile offence against liberty, while at a table in one corner three young exquisites were discussing the virtues of a

new shoe-buckle and the piquances of the latest demi-mondaine of the place. The proprietor of the inn, a fat, tallow-faced foreigner in black, scuttled hither and thither, and beamed with delight when Jeffray spoke to him in Italian. Richard felt that the fellow would have licked the dust off any great, little gentleman's shoes had his highness honored him with such an order. Money, impudence, and ostentation were the only noble necessities amid such surroundings. Beggared, sea-stained Ulysses would have had the dogs set on him in such a pace.

Richard, after being conducted to the gate by the proprietor, who jabbered Italian, and appeared ready to embrace his patron had not etiquette intervened, strolled down the village towards the Pantiles, and looked for the house where the Lady Letitia was staying. A rat-tat from a brass knocker on a green front door brought Jeffray face to face with the dowager's footman in cerise and buff. The man's smug face relaxed into a grin as he bowed Richard into the narrow hall, and surrendered him to the urbanity of Mr. Parsons. The Lady Letitia was at home, and expected a few folk of some consequence to tea and cards. The major-domo dared to assure Richard that her ladyship would be rejoiced at seeing him.

When Jeffray was ushered into his aunt's room, he found the old lady seated alone at one of the windows overlooking the Pantiles. Two card-tables were set out at the upper end, and a great silver tray ladened with choice china in blue and gold stood on a gate-legged table by the fire. For the rest, the room appeared shabby and colorless, the gilding on the walls dull and cracked, the carpet worn, the brocades and tapestries faded. Certainly its atmosphere was one of genteel elegance, and in a fashionable health resort even a grocer's parlor was considered elegant. It was the inmates who mattered, not the upholstery and the chandeliers.

The Lady Letitia received her nephew with absolute effusion. She tottered up, putting aside her stick, and held out two gouty hands to him with the smile of a most amiable of grandmothers. The recollection of her hurried flight from Rodenham did not appear to disturb her equanimity, for the old lady had grown accustomed to forgetting "incidents" in her day. She kissed Jeffray on both cheeks, leaving in each case a patch of powder behind, and then held him at arm's length, gazing in his face.

"Ha, ha, mon cher; why, you look quite brave and well, though a little thin. By the Queen of Hearts, I am overjoyed at seeing you, with hardly a spot or a pock-mark either! You are a credit to your physician, Richard; all's well that ends well; a wise proverb. And when did you arrive, sir? What, last night! To be sure, Richard, you ought to have shown yourself to a poor old woman earlier. And how is the dear Jilian, is she with you?"

The Lady Letitia, still talking, subsided again into her chair. She looked very yellow and ugly despite her rouge, and she was short of breath, as Richard noticed. Age seemed to be gaining fast on her, and even a liberal remittance from her bankers could not keep her from growing feeble. Jeffray was astonished at the change that even two months had wrought in her. Her fierce, peering eyes were bright as ever, but he could see that her hands trembled, and that a senile tremor was

shaking the feathers in her "head."

"Sit down, nephew, sit down. And how does Miss Jilian like The Wells, sir? You ought to have brought her to see me, Richard."

Jeffray had settled himself on a stool by the window. He was watching the gay stream of color in the walk below, one hand playing with the hilt of his sword.

"Jilian is at Hardacre, aunt," he said.

"Indeed, sir, indeed!"

"I was ordered here for my health by Surgeon Stott. It seems a gay place, madam. I have never before seen so many butterflies flitting about together."

The Lady Letitia's keen and angular face had taken on an expression of vivid alertness. Her birdlike eyes twinkled over her nephew's face. Certainly he appeared more melancholy and self-centred than ever, and spoke listlessly, as though some trouble were weighing on his mind. The old lady's insatiable curiosity was awake on the instant. It was her fate to be forever prying and peering into the affairs of others.

"I hope dear Jilian is well, Richard."

"Not very well, aunt."

"Eh, eh! What's been the matter?"

"Miss Hardacre has had the small-pox."

"The small-pox!"

"Yes."

The old lady's eyes glittered shrewdly. She sat with her hands on the crook of her stick, looking at Richard with penetration. There were cynical and amused wrinkles about her mouth. Jeffray's melancholy, his air of abstraction, expressed infinite things to the Lady Letitia. She could have chuckled over the apparent fulfilment of her prophecies. Miss Jilian, doubtless, had had her complexion shattered, and Mr. Richard was feeling utterly out of love with her.

"Hum, Richard, mon cher, pardon me, but you look worried, troubled. Will you not confide in an old woman, eh? I have seen a great deal of the world."

Jeffray, who had been leaning with one elbow on the window-sill, and drumming on the glass with his fingers, turned suddenly, looking vexed and half ashamed. He had still enough mock pride left in him to resent the steady conviction that his elderly relative had warned him very shrewdly. He had always half despised the worldly old Jezebel, but she seemed to have the laugh of him for the moment.

"To tell you the truth, madam," he said, unbosoming himself with clumsy brusqueness and with an effort, "Jilian has been much disfigured."

The Lady Letitia leaned forward on her stick.

"There, there, mon cher Richard, I understand."

"I gave it to her."

“And now you love her no longer, nephew, eh? Do not contradict me, sir, I can see it in every line of your face. Poor boy! poor boy! It is a mercy that you are not married.”

Jeffray, who had been writhing and reddening before the old lady’s eyes, started and flashed a questioning look at her as the last words were uttered.

“A mercy, madam!” he exclaimed.

“Of course, my dear.”

Jeffray’s upper lip tightened, and he looked sullen about the eyes.

“It was all my fault,” he said. “I suppose I ought to act like a man of honor. I ought to marry her, I know.”

The Lady Letitia actually broke out into a merry laugh. Her eyes twinkled, and she tapped on the floor applaudingly with her stick.

“Richard, mon cher, when will you learn to put on the breeches?”

“Madam!”

“Lud, sir, when will you discover that these silly sentiments, these toys of honor, are only idols invented and decorated by us women to delude and impress the callow male. We must get husbands, and keep ’em, if we can. Foh, sir, better marry a red-cheeked, bouncing wench who wants you because you are a man, than a fine spinster who is hunting for a household and for money.”

Jeffray, sentimentalist that he was, looked surprised and even shocked.

“Why, madam, you are a lady yourself, one of a class, and can you talk like this?”

The dowager chuckled with cynical delight.

“Come, come, Richard; I have played the game, have I not? I have schemed and plotted, tilted my nose, and rustled my silken skirts. Yes, yes. But I know what it is worth, sir; I know the value of a pawn, a bishop, and a king. I have studied the moves, the openings, the finesse, the checkmate. It is only a game that we polite and religious gamblers cultivate. Do not be deluded, sir. Hearts are not broken at five-and-thirty; they are leather at twenty when the modesty dries up. Do you think that Miss Hardacre would marry you if you were a common attorney or a penniless ensign? No, no. The illusions have gone. It is comfort, carriages, servants, baubles, money for cards. That is her disease, Richard.”

Jeffray hung his head and stroked his chin, yet discovered, despite his sensibility, a comforting flavor in the old lady’s words.

“It may be so,” he said, with the air of a fatalist.

The Lady Letitia, however, saw nothing inevitable in the marriage. She cackled with the greatest good humor, and tapped Jeffray’s knee with the point of her stick.

“Dear Lord, Richard, don’t pull such a very long face. Do you think you are the first man who has grown tired of the angel? There is not a more scheming, artful,

intrigue-eaten veteran in the county. Why should you marry her because she wants your money? As for a betrothal, nephew, sensible people ought to regard it as a state trial, a bargain that either may break with honor, when it seems likely to prove a bad one. Let the scandal-mongers go hang. When you have money, Richard, you need not be afraid of people's tongues. Cock your hat at them all, step out and swagger. And how does the noble Lancelot behave to you, sir?"

Jeffray's mouth hardened as he remembered his cousin's red face and overbearing manner. The Lady Letitia had struck the right chord. The look on her nephew's face applauded her diplomacy.

"Do not be browbeaten by that oaf, Richard," she continued, with much spirit. "Lot Hardacre is a fine fellow to set himself up as a judge of honor. Why, he has jilted three girls to my knowledge, and is content now to amuse himself with farmers' daughters, without the burdens of matrimony. Stand up to him, nephew; rattle your sword. The more you show your teeth in this world the better will people respect you. The Christian fool is a poor creature. He gets an abundance of kicks, sir, and, by Heaven! he deserves them. Ah, here is my dear friend, Dean Stubbs. Nephew, you must stay and drink tea with us, and take a hand at cards."

XXXI

The following morning a letter came to Richard from Hardacre, a carefully sealed epistle smelling strangely of musk. He stared at it like a spendthrift eying an unpayable bill, opened the letter as he sipped his chocolate, spread it on the tray before him, and read it grudgingly at his leisure. He was no longer moved to kiss the place where Miss Jilian's hand had rested. The sentimental infatuation had withered in a week. It had never possessed roots in the natural soil. The letter ran:

> "My dear Richard,—I was a little surprised to receive the note that informed me that you were proceeding to Tunbridge Wells for your health. Was it shame or delicacy of feeling that prevented you from taking leave of me in person? You must remember how little sympathy you showed me when we first met after my illness. I am ready to pardon you, however, and shall expect more sensibility in you in the future.
>
> "Doubtless you will be rejoiced to hear that I am in good health, and that my poor complexion promises to improve. The great Dr. Buffin visited me yesterday. He had travelled down by private coach to Lady Polsons, and Lancelot rode over to desire him to call on me at Hardacre. His opinion proved to be most sympathetic and comforting, so that you can rejoice with me in my fresh flow of spirits.
>
> "Is that terrible old woman—your aunt—at The Wells? Let me warn you against her, Richard. She has led a wicked life, and has no respect for God or the truth."

Here followed certain very proper expressions of affection that made Jeffray wince and color. The letter ended with a veiled threat, the significance of which the man was world-wise enough to understand. He suspected, and suspected rightly, that Miss Hardacre was not singly responsible for the document before him. He had received letters from Jilian of old, formless, feeble, and vaporish things, indifferent as to spelling, commonplace as to style. Richard imagined that some family friend had collaborated with her in the production of the letter, and his docility was not increased by the impression.

Needless to say the Lady Letitia was permitted to read the epistle, and the unflattering reference to her morals brought the light of battle into the old lady's eyes. She smiled very grimly at her nephew, tapped on the floor with her crooked stick, and desired him to state what he thought of Miss Hardacre's letter. Richard had been watching the people parading on the Pantiles, looking morose and melancholy, a man with a growing grievance.

“You will see, madam,” he said, turning restlessly in his chair, “that Miss Hardacre’s complexion is likely to improve.”

The dowager sniffed, and made an irritable gesture with the letter.

“So she writes, Richard,” she retorted.

“Dr. Buffin is a physician of experience.”

“An old mollycoddle, sir, fit to treat a cold in the head. He is one of those gentlemen who takes two guineas for telling people just what they wish to hear. But supposing the lady’s complexion mends, Richard, will your love mend with it?”

This was a home-thrust, and Jeffray’s face betrayed his inability to parry it. He played with his watch-chain and seals, and looked blank pessimism so far as his affection for Miss Hardacre was concerned.

“I suppose I ought to be ashamed of myself,” he confessed.

“Nonsense, mon cher, nonsense.”

“I cannot help my instincts.”

“Exactly, sir, exactly. Supposing now that you were set down in front of an ugly china cat, and were told that unless you admired and adored it eternally you would be the most dishonorable rascal in Christendom. What should you think, sir?—what should you think?”

The sally drew a smile even from Richard’s melancholy.

“I should feel that the command was unreasonable,” he said.

“Of course, Richard, no one can accomplish the impossible. Love has wings of fire, sir, it does not crawl like a spider in a web. And supposing now that you hesitated about adoring the same china cat, and that a great, red-faced bully stood over you with a whip, and swore he’d thrash you into admiring the monstrosity, what would you do then, Richard, eh?—what would you do then?”

“Rebel, I suppose,” confessed the catechumen, with a frown.

Though sitting as a disciple at his aunt’s feet, Jeffray had no great difficulty in amusing himself reflectively in the village. He walked on the Pantiles, watched the little comedies of life, listened to the music, dined at the various inns, and modestly refused the ogling invitations of sundry damsels in gay gowns and gaudy hats. Twice he attended at the Assembly Rooms with the Lady Letitia, and was not a little amused to find that the old lady had already discovered a rich and pretty rival to outshine Miss Jilian. Jeffray’s pulses remained unstirred by this new nereid. He danced with her twice, found her amiable and commonplace, and laughed with modest incredulity when the dowager rallied him on his chances. A young man in love might vote Dame Venus herself a very prosaic and ordinary person.

Jeffray’s favorite haunt was a rock on the Common, where he could bask in the sun, and look into the blue distance towards Pevensel. Bess was in his thoughts always; in truth, she was thought itself, the very blood within his brain. He rehearsed her every pose, gesture, and expression, the simple and half-tender words

that she had spoken to him, the way her eyes grew full of light when they met his. He remembered her bathing at Holy Cross, a white pillar of loveliness glimmering in the sun. He remembered her at Thorney Chapel, fierce, miserable, and ashamed. Sweetest of all were the memories of the night when she had bent over him as he lay in bed, and the day when he had met her in the larch-wood and she had poured out all her despair into his ears.

What wonder that Miss Hardacre's influence grew less and less, and that mere airy and fragile sentiments weighed like gossamer against the gold of love. Time and the Lady Letitia appeared to be clearing the metaphysical fog from Jeffray's brain. The dark melted, the noon sun shone. True, he could not marry Bess, but his love for her should save him from perjuring himself by an alliance with Jilian. The truth was as plain as an Egyptian obelisk against the desert sky. Why should he shut his eyes and wander on, hating himself, and hating Jilian. What—and did he not pity her? Yes, in a vague and passive way, remembering ever the Lady Letitia's cry of "money," and Mr. Lancelot's insolent face.

It was the fourth day of Jeffray's sojourn at The Wells when the Lady Letitia succeeded in convincing him, somewhat dramatically, of how he was being exploited by the gentry at Hardacre. The dowager produced a letter from her reticule and handed it to Richard with a grim twinkle in her shrewd old eyes. It was a letter written from a confidential friend of Lot Hardacre's to a confidential friend of the Lady Letitia's. Jeffray's betrothal had been broached in a gossip between the dowager and her confidant, and the letter had been confided to the old lady's care, on the understanding she was on no account to disclose its contents to her nephew. The Lady Letitia's jesuitical conscience disposed very easily of the promise, and Jeffray was admitted behind the scenes.

The passages that concerned him ran as follows:

> "Jill Hardacre, that gay spinster, has had the small-pox, and looks—so folks say—like a pitted orange with a wig. She is betrothed, as you have probably heard, to a wealthy young sapling whose grandsire made a fortune in iron. It seems that the young gentleman is inclined to withdraw from the match, since the sweet maid is grievously disfigured. But our friend Lancelot thinks otherwise in the matter. Jilt my sister, sir, egad, but you may bet your last guinea that he won't. The lad is a soft young fool, and will faint, damme, at the sight of a sword."

"So you see, sweet coz, that the noble Lot intends to pin the calf to his promise in swaggering fashion. Well, Jill Hardacre has had her day, and this promises to be her last and final hunting-party. Now or never is the cry. The Hardacres want money, and the young squireling has a veritable pot of gold. Amusing, eh? Life is a merry jest, to be sure."

When Richard had read the letter through he handed it back very quietly to the dowager. His face had hardened to that white, expressionless mobility that bespeaks

action. The mouth was no longer soft and plastic, the eyes full of melancholy and reflective doubt.

“Well, Richard, what is to be done?”

Jeffray stood up and stretched himself.

“Take fencing lessons,” he said, curtly.

“Ah ha, that is the right spirit!”

“I could handle a sword in Italy, but am stiff and out of play. I suppose there is a fencing-master in the place?”

The old lady’s eyes glittered, and she looked at her nephew approvingly.

“Yes, a Frenchman, a wonderful fellow, I believe. I will tell Parsons to go at once and find where he lodges.”

“Thanks, madam. I will have a week’s practice with him before I return to Rodenham.”

XXXII

The lilac had fallen and the roses were in bloom when Jeffray took a stately and affectionate leave of the Lady Letitia, and journeyed back to Rodenham with Peter Gladden in his coach and four. The dowager had appeared sincerely sorry at Richard's departure. He had refused to permit her to repay him the two hundred guineas that she had borrowed at Rodenham; moreover, he had made the old lady several handsome presents, lace and jewelry being still acceptable to the belle of seventy. Day by day the Lady Letitia diligently applauded Jeffray's strengthening spirit of revolt, trumpeting in his ears the preposterous insolence of Mr. Lancelot's contempt, and bidding him work out his own salvation. Her only regret appeared to have been that Richard had refused her the joy of choosing him a wife.

Dick Wilson remarked the change in Jeffray when they walked in the garden on the evening of his return. The man's face and figure appeared to have gained alertness and decision. There was a new suppleness and grace about his carriage that contrasted with the half-slouching and dreamy melancholy that had burdened him before. His eyes were keen and alive to the things about him. He carried his head high, and spoke with more decision than of old.

"I must confess, sir," said the painter, frankly, "that the air of Tunbridge seems to have suited you."

Jeffray smiled as they paced the terrace side by side.

"I have been taking fencing lessons, Dick," he said.

"Fencing lessons, sir?"

"From D'Aiglan, the Frenchman. He has done me a great deal of good. I am ready for any emergency."

Wilson elevated his eyebrows expressively, and looked at Jeffray with curious intentness.

"I always thought that you were a man of peace, sir," he said.

Jeffray laughed rather grimly, and, drawing Wilson away into the yew walk, told him briefly the whole tenor of his love affair with Miss Hardacre. He was beginning to learn that truth and the sword are much akin, and that brave candor is often more magical than sentimental secretiveness. Wilson, much astonished, plodded to and fro at Jeffray's side, fingering his chin and emitting an expressive interjection from time to time. He was a broad-minded student of the world's whims and weaknesses, and his sympathies were wholly with Jeffray in the matter.

"What are you going to do, sir?" he asked at last.

"Tell the truth as kindly as I can, Dick, and defy this fire-eating cousin of mine. I have no intention of financing the family by marrying the daughter."

“You have made up your mind, eh?”

“I am tired, Dick, of contemplating a life-long hypocrisy.”

Wilson brushed the tobacco ash and snuff from his waistcoat, whistled a few lines of a favorite ditty, and then laid his hand on Jeffray’s shoulder.

“I think you are right, sir,” he said.

“Thanks, Dick, thanks.”

“There is too much damned trafficking in matrimony in this world. I shall never forget old Hogarth’s preaching. Unless God and the heart are in the thing, the bond is but a pledge to the devil.”

Jeffray looked Wilson straight in the eyes.

“I am glad to hear you speak like this, Dick,” he said; “it strengthens me.”

“And I am glad, sir,” quoth the painter, “that you are one of the few people who can tell the truth.”

Meanwhile Bess had been watching and waiting in Pevensel for Jeffray’s return, eager to show him the brooch that Dan had given her—a cross within a circle of gold studded with emeralds. The brooch had proved to her that her memories of the past were not mere dreams begotten out of restless fancy of childhood. Perhaps old Ursula was not her aunt, and perhaps Dan and the forest-folk had no blood communion with her, as she had been taught to believe. Once she showed the brooch to Ursula, watching the old woman’s wrinkled face keenly the while. The crone had peered at it with some uneasiness, working her toothless mouth and fidgeting at her apron-strings with her fingers. She had asked Bess how she had come by the bauble, and, being told that it was Dan’s present, she had held up her hands, turned her back on the girl, and refused to utter another word on the matter. Ursula’s attitude puzzled Bess. She went solemn-eyed through the early days of June, thinking of Jeffray and the past, and wondering what would happen in the future.

Twice she had quarrelled fiercely with Dan since he had given her the brooch, and it was only by grappling her passions down that she could keep her hands from shedding blood. Silence and an attitude of meek submission went sorely against the temper of her soul. It was only the dire necessity for dissimulation that held her quiet under her husband’s bullyings. For bully her he did after the fashion of a great, clumsy savage, proud of his own huge strength and the prerogatives thereof. It pleased the oaf to fancy that he was taming Bess as he would have tamed a bad-tempered filly; that he was breaking her spirit, and fastening his bondage upon her with the masterful complacency of a lord and a possessor. Like a great ape he would grin and mock her, tweak her hair, pinch her arms, twit her with his triumph, and gloat over the passivity that seemed to flatter his strength. Now and again Bess’s anger would blaze up in hot revolt, a passion-play that lent a charm to the brute pride of conquest. He believed that he had tamed and subdued the girl, not suspecting that he was only stacking the pent-up fire within her heart.

It was not till Jeffray had ridden on three successive evenings to the yew valley that Bess was able to slip away from the hamlet to meet him. It was a still evening in June, the grass knee-deep in the golden meadows, the scent of the white may heavy on the air. The voices of the birds alone broke the deep silence of the summer woods. The black spires of the yews and their massive limbs were streaked and eyeleted with the flooding gold of the western sky.

Jeffray came first to the trysting-place, feeling like a man who has drunk a bumper of sparkling wine. He tethered his horse deep in one of the thickets, and went and stood in the entry of the Hermit's Cave, a rough chamber cut in the rock, with a low doorway and a mere slit of a window. The air was damp, pungent, and refreshing. Below lay the pool covered with white water-weed, where the old recluse of yore had drawn his water and kept his fish. There was still the outline of a cross cut in the wall of the chamber, and a broken bench of stone jutted out beneath the window.

Richard straightened suddenly as he leaned against the rough jamb of the doorway, and stood listening with a smile hovering about his mouth. Some one was singing in the yew wood—an old country song, simple and full of pathos. The mellow and half-husky voice rose and fell amid the shadows of the trees.

Soon he saw her coming down the path, the gnarled and rugged trunks and spreading boughs building a sun-splashed colonnade towards the pool. Jeffray went down through the tall grass and met the girl at the edge of the wood.

They did not touch each other's hands, but stood quite close together, smiling shyly like a pair of children. Neither seemed to have a single word to say for the moment. It was all silent intuition with them, a glance, a sense of nearness, a rush of blood to the face. They turned and walked towards the great stone by the pool. Bess sat down there. Richard found himself beside her, a foot of the bare rock between them.

The girl's eyes were searching his face.

"You look quite brown and strong," she said.

"Yes, I am strong again," he answered her.

"Have you ridden here—before?"

"The two past evenings. I had a feeling that I should find you to-night."

"Dan went out into the woods, and so—I came."

They sat in silence a moment, looking at each other, and hearing no sound save the occasional plash of a fish leaping in the pool. Bess's fingers were feeling for the brooch at her bosom. She unpinned it, and, holding it in her palm, held it out to Jeffray with a smile.

"Dan has given me this," she said.

Their fingers touched and lingered an instant in the contact.

"It is the brooch I remember—"

"Yes—"

"At the tall lady's throat who was near me when I was a little child."

Jeffray, who was staring at the thing, glanced up suddenly into Bess's face. A look of mute inquiry, of significant sympathy, flashed between them.

"How did the brooch come to Dan?" asked the man.

"I do not know."

"Strange. Perhaps—"

"Dan went out one night, and gave me this in the morning. Where it came from I cannot tell, unless Isaac, his father, gave it him."

Jeffray sat in thought, balancing the brooch in his palm, and gazing out over the still waters of the pool. Bess watched him, her hands resting on the stone, her brown forearms bare to the elbow.

"Bess," he said to her at last.

She swayed slightly towards him, her eyes on his.

"Can you discover how Dan came by the brooch?"

She frowned, and her mouth hardened; it was not in her heart to seek anything from Dan.

"I will not ask anything from him," she said.

"Why not, Bess?"

"Because I hate him, hate him night and day."

Richard looked at her almost wistfully.

"Yet you may learn something of your past from him," he said.

"Yes—"

"You may be no Grimshaw, Bess; you look to have finer blood in you than theirs."

Bess lifted her head as though some ennoblement would be very sweet to one who felt the shame of her present lot. Any such discovery would lift her nearer to Jeffray and lessen that gulf between them that was ever stretched before her pride.

"I will try," she said at last—"try what I can learn from Dan. He is a great fool, though he is so strong."

"And you do not love him any better?"

"Love Dan?"

"Yes."

"Ah, is there any heart in me that I should love the brute! I have felt near killing him before now."

Scarcely had this burst of passion spent itself in words when Bess's face grew bleak and set. She held up a hand and sat listening, rigid yet alert. Jeffray could hear nothing, for his ears were less quick to the sounds of the forest than the girl's. Only

by the look of strained intentness on her face could he tell that she caught sounds that did not reach his hearing.

"What is it?" he asked her, in a whisper.

"I hear a dog panting in the wood."

"Ah!"

"Where is your horse?"

"Well out of sight of the path."

"Good. Listen to that!"

The rapid sound of some brute beast's breathing drew near out of the silence of the wood. Even Jeffray could hear it as he sat with his eyes fixed on Bess's face. Then a whistle shrilled out from the darkness of the trees, seeming to make the still air quiver. It was Dan's whistle, and the panting was the panting of his dog.

Quick as thought Bess started up, beckoned to Jeffray, and ran through the grass towards the hermitage. The man followed her, glancing back over his shoulder at the impenetrable shadows of the yews. Bess sprang in up the low steps of the doorway, seized Richard's wrist as he entered after her, and, with her face close to his, spoke in a whisper.

"It is Dan, curse him!"

"He may not see us."

"The devil must have put it into the fool's head to come this way."

"Shall I slip out and leave you?"

Bess understood the spirit that prompted him, and that it was not cowardice that inspired the question. They were still very close to each other, Bess's stray side curls brushing Jeffray's cheek.

"Stay with me," she said.

"Bess!"

"Stay."

"I will."

She flashed a wonderful look at him of a sudden and tightened her fingers for one moment about his wrist. Jeffray colored as he drew his sword and watched Bess move towards the window. Stepping back to where the inner wall of the room lay in deep shadow, he heard the panting of the dog and the rasp of Dan's gruff voice as he called the brute to heel.

Bess drew back from the window and came gliding along the wall towards Jeffray. He understood that she had caught a glimpse of Dan or of the dog, and that their one hope was that the man might pass by and keep the spaniel at his heel. Bess drew close to Jeffray and leaned back against the wall where the darkness lay. Their hands touched and held each other. A strong thrill passed up Jeffray's arm. He could feel the warmth of Bess's body as she half leaned against him. She was holding her

breath and watching the stretch of sward that showed through the doorway.

Again they heard Dan calling to the dog. He was passing by the pool, and they could catch his heavy foot-falls on the grass. The footsteps ceased of a sudden, and they could hear the panting of the dog quite near. Jeffray felt the pressure of Bess's fingers. They looked into each other's eyes—one long look that seemed to challenge fate.

Dan's harsh hail rang out again.

"Heel, Doll, heel—you bitch!"

The spaniel whimpered wistfully. They heard her move through the long grass, splash through the shallows of the pool, the sound of her breathing growing less and less. They saw Dan go striding past the doorway, his gun over his shoulder, a hare dangling by the legs from his left hand. In a flash he was gone, the black spaniel padding at his heels and looking back restlessly from time to time.

Bess gave a great sigh and leaned heavily against Jeffray. Somehow the man's arm had crept round her, and he felt the full ebb and flow of her breath. The warmth of her body seemed to steal into him with a sense of nearness and of contact. Her head was half resting on his shoulder, her hair brushing his cheek.

"Bess."

She turned her head and looked up at him, half wearily, yet with a tired tenderness. Her eyes seemed doubly bright in the cool darkness of the place.

"He has gone."

"Thank God."

XXXIII

The abominable and discourteous indifference displayed by the master of Rodenham would have been sufficient to incense a less selfish person than Miss Jilian Hardacre. Three days had passed since Jeffray had returned from The Wells, and yet he had not so much as presented himself at the house of his betrothed. No gentleman's behavior could have been more deserving of censure, and Miss Hardacre had shed angry tears over the indecent remissness of her lover. As for Brother Lot, the gathering cloud of thunder on his face would have honored the solemn temper of an Epic. Sir Peter and his son took counsel together in the dilemma, and the elder restrained his hot-headed Rupert of a son from galloping straightway to the charge. Sir Peter declared against an immediate recourse to methods of moral torture lest Mr. Richard should complain of provocation. A letter should be despatched from the fair Jilian, requiring Jeffray to pay his respects to her or challenge the peril of her severe displeasure.

When Jeffray returned from the yew valley that night, he found that a servant had left a letter for him from Hardacre. From the warm fragrance of the summer twilight he came into the old library where Gladden had lit the candles in the silver candlesticks. Jeffray threw open the window and stood for a moment looking out into the night. A myriad stars were shining in the dusky vault of blue; dew was in the air; a faint, fresh perfume ascended out of the earth. In the thickets nightingales were singing, and a streak of gold still gleamed in the west.

Jilian's letter was in his hand. He turned back from the window with a great sigh, and sat down before the bureau where the candles were burning. It was no desire of his to read what was written in his betrothed's letter. He could picture the bitter words it might contain, and his own conscience hinted at reproaches. Why had Jilian written to him that night, the night of all nights, when the stars seemed afire and the earth smelled of love? Could not the rich joy of it have been his without this note of discord?

Almost savagely he broke the seal and tore open the covering. There was no tremor about his hands as he held the sheet towards the light of the candles.

> "RICHARD,—I am amazed that you have not disturbed yourself to visit me, though three days have passed since your return from Tunbridge. Such discourtesy stands in need of explanation. I desire your presence at Hardacre to-morrow before noon. Do not presume to disappoint me.
>
> "JILIAN."

Jeffray read the letter through twice, and then, holding it for an instant in the

flame of one of the candles, tossed it burning on to the polished floor, and saw it blacken to a film of quivering ash. A grim yet half-humorous smile hovered about his mouth. On the morrow he would tell Jilian the truth, and if the noble Lot desired a quarrel, the sooner the feud were recognized the better.

At Hardacre the red may and the laburnum's gold shone out from dewy depths of green. The white may and the mountain-ash were covered as with driven snow. In the park the chestnuts stood like huge green pinnacles crocketed with ivory and coral. Copper beeches gleamed in the sun. Peonies and poppies were in flower below the terrace, and the walls of the old house itself were red with a hundred roses.

As before, Jilian received Richard in the red parlor, dressed in her best silks and damasks, and looking more the great lady now that her pride had entered zealously into the play. Her complexion appeared to have improved under the arts of the toilet, but the scars and the seams could not be hid. She had made her father and Lancelot promise that they would leave Jeffray to her devices that day. She desired to treat with him at her own discretion, and to leave male blusterings and high-handedness to the future.

Jilian rose from her chair when Richard was announced, swept him a fine courtesy, and then seated herself on a settle by the harpsichord. She noticed that the man looked sad and sullen, stiff and constrained, with no brightening of the eyes. He stood before her with his hat under his arm, fingering the silver buttons on his coat, and staring at her in melancholy silence. He was thinking how strange and elusive a thing was personality, in that a peevish and swarthy face should have changed the temper of his life within three months.

"You have sent for me," he said, quietly.

The crude formality of these opening words enlightened Miss Hardacre as to the sentiments she might find in him. His face was firm and immobile as marble, and an extreme and studied dignity chastened his habitual and good-natured grace.

"Yes, I have sent for you, Richard," she said, eying him critically. "It is time that I received some consideration at your hands."

Jeffray flushed slightly and bowed to her. For the moment there was an uncomfortable and unnerving pause. Jilian was playing irritably with her fan, an indescribable expression of restrained impatience on her face.

"Well, sir, have you nothing to say for yourself?"

Jeffray appeared to straighten his body, brace back his shoulders for the inevitable confession. He looked straight at Jilian, as though compelling himself to the uttermost candor.

"I have something to tell you, Jilian," he said.

Miss Hardacre was alert on the instant, an unenviable glint in her eyes, one satin slipper tapping on the floor.

"Ah, yes, Richard, I know quite well what you are going to say to me. And so

you think, sir, that you can toss me aside like a soiled shoe!”

A shadow as of pain passed across Jeffray’s face.

“Jilian! Believe me, it is no easy thing for me to speak of what has been working in my mind.”

The lady tossed her head, sneered till her teeth showed, and then broke out into a titter.

“And so, Richard, you find that you have been mistaken.”

“That is the truth, Jilian.”

“And do you not think it a pity, sir, that you did not discover this—some months ago?”

Jeffray, hanging his head and looking very miserable, walked to the window and stood staring out of it in silence. The landscape stretched gray and meaningless before his eyes, so hustled was he by his own thoughts. Jilian was watching him with a rapacious air, her painted face looking old and almost shrewish. Truth, like the shield in the fable, bore a different blazoning to these two who studied it from opposing situations.

Presently Jeffray turned from the window, walked back into the middle of the room, with the look of a man determined to speak the last word.

“It is not easy,” he began, “to confess that one has been mistaken.”

“Not easy, Richard, eh?”

“My sense of honor—”

“Your sense of honor, Richard, compels you to make excuses.”

Jeffray colored at the taunt.

“Jilian, I have not come to make excuses.”

“Ah, no, of course not!”

“My conscience will not let me play the hypocrite.”

“Your conscience, Richard! Ah, this is beautiful!”

It was easy to see that the man’s attitude of tragic self-righteousness roused all the scorn in the woman’s nature. Jeffray did not appear to realize how dishonorable his sentiments were when viewed in the calm light of impartial reason. He was disgustingly confident of his own honor. His smug conceit exasperated the lady.

“Richard,” she said, her voice sounding harsh and strained.

Jeffray faced her steadily.

“You have come to tell me that you are not going to marry me. That is so, is it not?”

“I have come to confess that my love is no longer what it was.”

“Did I not say so, cousin? What is the use of our clipping and trimming our phrases? To put it bluntly, you are sick of me.”

Jeffray regarded her as though trying to read her thoughts.

"I can only acknowledge my own guilt," he said.

Miss Hardacre's mouth gave a vicious twist.

"Then I may as well warn you, Richard," she retorted, "that you must consult Sir Peter in the matter."

"Sir Peter?"

"Of course."

Richard gave a frank shrug of the shoulders.

"What has Sir Peter to do with our marriage?" he said. "It is no business compact. I cannot promise things to your father which I cannot promise here to you."

Such dignified innocence became more exasperating each moment to the lady by the harpsichord. Yet she still smiled scornfully at her betrothed as though her superior knowledge of the world justified her in despising him.

"You misunderstand the whole matter, Richard," she said. "You have promised to marry me, and you gained my father's consent to the marriage. His authority must be consulted, though I can assure you, sir, he is not the man to suffer his daughter's affections to be trifled with. I am a weak woman, Richard, and my honor, since you seem so careless of it, had better remain in my father's keeping."

Jeffray, looking white and stern, understood whither Miss Hardacre's strategy was tending. He rallied himself, made her a polite bow, and confessed that he could suffer no parental interference.

"I have nothing to discuss with Sir Peter," he said.

"Nothing!"

"I cannot recognize his authority, Jilian, nor can your father coerce my conscience. It is a miserable business, but one cannot save the wine when the flask is broken."

This last sally dissipated the lady's remaining self-control. Was there ever such a puritanical and canting young hypocrite? He would be quoting the Bible and the marriage service to her in a moment to prove that his dishonor was a commendable virtue. Quivering with the impatience of her spite, she started up, and flashed a look at Jeffray that was more significant than a judicial ruling.

"Drat your conscience, Richard," she said. "I tell you, sir, that you are fickle and dishonorable, and that you have trifled with my affections. I may have lost some of my good looks, sir, but I am still a woman, to be treated with courtesy and not with cowardly lies and excuses."

"Jilian!"

"Do not call me Jilian, sir. I refer you instantly to my father. And if you slink and dare not face him, I can promise you that my brother is a man of courage. I may

be a weak woman, Mr. Jeffray, a woman who has treated you too kindly, and worn her heart upon her sleeve, but I am not to be trifled with as though I were some common farmer's daughter. I tell you that you have insulted my affections, sir, compromised my honor and the honor of my family."

Jeffray stood stock-still in the middle of the room, staring at Miss Hardacre's red and angry face. Her fury had transfigured her, as though some witch's wand had changed her from smiling youth into a fierce and scolding shrew. Few women look well when they are the creatures of wrath, and Jeffray was astonished and repelled by the transformation he beheld before him. Three months ago he would have been on his knees at Jilian's feet. Now he realized that she could look old, vixenish, and ugly.

"I am sorry you have spoken like this," he said.

"Sorry, sir—sorry! Nonsense; you don't care the price of a new pin. I am disgusted, sir—disgusted at the miserable lies you have the impudence to throw at me. I thought you a gentleman, sir. I find that you are a villain."

Jeffray crushed his hat between his hands, restrained himself by a great effort, and bowed to her with all the dignity he could command.

"I think that I had better take my leave of you," he said, coldly.

"Ah, do so, by all means. Your righteous self-conceit sickens me."

"Madam, I came to try and tell you the truth as courteously as I could."

Miss Hardacre pointed him to the door.

"Tell me no more lies," she said; "as for your conscience—I snap my fingers at it."

Jeffray, mortified and not sorry to escape, bowed once more to the lady, and left her to her tears, her smelling-salts, and her brother.

XXXIV

The evening of the day that Jeffray rode to break his betrothal with Miss Hardacre, Isaac Grimshaw came limping across from his cottage to find Dan plastering new tiles on the roof of his small byre. Isaac stood at the foot of the ladder, squinting up at his son against the evening sunlight, his white hair shining under his hat.

Dan pressed a tile home upon its bed of plaster, and, laying his trowel on the roof, looked down at his father.

"What be ye a-wanting?" he asked, scratching his beard with a black thumb nail.

Isaac was frowning and looking fierce and out of humor.

"Come down, lad, I ain't going to bellow at ye."

Dan climbed down and stood with one hand on the ladder, staring inquisitively into his father's face. It was not often that Isaac's complacency was ruffled by a grievance. His arbitrary nature found few foul winds to trouble him in Pevensel.

"What's amiss, dad?"

"That damned old she-dog Ursula's in a pet."

Dan grunted sympathetically.

"She be growing daft fast," he said.

"So I say, lad, but the old fool has a tongue, and a meddlesome tongue, too, bad blood to her. She might be doing us a deal of harm unless we quiet her silly old soul."

"What be Ursula whining for?"

"Guineas, lad; she be as sweet on the gold dirt as Solomon on his liquor."

Isaac leaned against the wall of the byre and explained the nature of the old woman's grievance. The gist of it was that Isaac had never given her the eighty guineas that he had promised her on Bess's marriage. Ursula Grimshaw was slipping into her dotage, and, like many an old creature in that maudlin December of life, she had waxed querulous and testy, jealous of her rights and greedy of her due. Her love of gold had increased with the waning of her intellect, and she was forever bemoaning Bess's absence and grumbling at her brother for cheating her of her rights. Isaac, who was never eager to disburse gold, and had kept the real secret of their wealth from all save Ursula and Dan, his son, had met the old woman's complaints with banter, and chuckled at her demand for the guineas he had promised. Ursula, however, had flown at last into a fit of senile rage, spread her claws, and spluttered like a cat. She would have the money, or Isaac should repent of cheating her because she was old and feeble. Had not Dan given Bess the brooch

of emeralds? The girl should hear the whole truth unless the money was forthcoming. With dramatic spite, Ursula had tottered up out of her chair, shaken her stick at Isaac, and cackled out threats that had made her brother change his tone.

"We must fetch another bag out of the chest, lad," Isaac said, at the end of the recital, "unless you are for giving up the guineas I gave ye."

Dan scratched his head and frowned at the suggestion.

"Drat the old hussy," he retorted, "I'll give her none of my guineas. I be wanting a new wagon and new gear, and the girl'll be wasting a powerful lot of money."

Isaac's face suggested the thought that a tap with an axe on the old lady's crown would have solved the difficulty as clearly as possible. He suppressed the temptation towards violence, however, and bade Dan call at his cottage that night after it was dark. They would go to the Monk's Grave and bring back the gold that should keep old Ursula quiet.

Bess had been vexing her ingenuity to discover how she might charm from Dan the secret of the brooch. This golden bauble starred with its emerald eyes seemed to her the one talisman that could break the silence of the past. She had tried to charm some confession from old Ursula, but the dame would tell Bess nothing, despite her grievance against Isaac. Thus when Dan, surly and morose, came in to Bess at supper-time, and told her curtly that he would be out with his gun that night, the girl grew keen and alert as a deer that scents peril on the wind.

Had not Dan given her the brooch on the morning after his last night out with his gun in Pevensel? She remembered that he had brought no birds back with him in the morning, and the more Bess pondered it, the more suspicious she grew of her husband's honesty. To be sure Dan would be out in the forest at night now and again, and she more than suspected that he was in league with the land smugglers who worked from the sea up through Pevensel. Thorney Chapel was notorious in the neighborhood, and it was whispered that the parson had once locked a hard-pressed cargo in the vestry. Bess assured herself that there was some secret to be discovered. She made up her mind to follow Dan, and to see where he went that night in Pevensel.

After supper, looking meek and innocent, she took her candle, bade Dan good-night, and went up to bed. Bolting the door after her, she sat down on the chest to listen, after throwing a gray cloak over her shoulders and buckling on her shoes ready for the adventure. Half an hour passed before she heard Dan stumping to and fro in the kitchen beneath. She heard him take his gun down from the beam, call to his black spaniel, and unlatch the door. Swift and sure-footed she was out of the bedroom, and down the creaking stairs into the kitchen. The wood fire was burning brightly on the irons, the light twinkling on the pewter, and playing with the shadows in the dark corners of the room. She tried the door softly—found that Dan had locked it and taken the key. With a feeling of tense excitement, Bess unlatched the casement, climbed out on to the ledge, and slipped down into the garden. She stood listening a moment, cowering under the shadow of the wall, and looking out

into the dark. She could see a light twinkling behind the kitchen window of Isaac's cottage and hear voices coming gruffly out of the gloom. Stooping, and gliding under cover of the rose-bushes and the pea-sticks to the garden gate, she slipped out and passed along under the shadows of the apple-trees.

The voices came from the direction of Isaac's cottage. Bess recognized the old man's impatient treble, Dan answering him curtly in his gruff bass. The candle went out of a sudden, and she heard the yelp of a dog and the closing and locking of a door. Two dim figures showed in the murk before her. They moved away towards the woods. Bess, running forward on the edge of the orchard, reached Isaac's cottage and crouched under the window, listening. She caught the whimpering of a dog, and knew that Dan had left the spaniel locked in the cottage. It would be safer for her to follow them now that they were alone.

Brushing past the spreading bracken, halting, listening, peering from behind the great trunks, Bess followed the voices that led her through the forest. The scent of pines drifted through the warm darkness, while here and there a ghostly may-tree shed fragrance from its white dome. Soon Bess saw a light gleam out and go jigging and waving through the darkness. Isaac had lit his lantern. Bess blessed him for it, knowing that it would help her in the chase. She walked warily, her arched feet a-tingle with a sense of peril and adventure, her eyes watching the light that flashed and fled beyond the trees.

It was a mile before Isaac and his son came to the glade where a white-trunked fir grew on the Monk's Knoll. They set the lantern down on the grass. Dan handling the spade, while Isaac squatted on the trunk of a fallen tree.

Bess, seeing that the light had become stationary among the trees, drew near slowly, slipping from trunk to trunk. Fearful of treading on dead wood and hearing it snap in the deathly stillness of the forest, she felt the ground with her foot each time before putting her weight upon it. At the edge of the glade bracken and white chervil and goutweed were growing. Bess, going down on her hands and knees, crawled slowly to where a low bush stood, and, drawing her hood forward over her face, looked out over the glade.

The lantern threw a vague circle of light over the grass barred with the black shadows cast by its frame. Bess could see old Isaac sitting hunched on the dead tree. He had lit his pipe, and a faint glow showed above the brown bowl, the smoke wreathing upward into the dark. The light from the lantern fell upon Dan, who had thrown off his coat and was working in his shirt. The bull neck and the hairy chest were showing, though the level of the light hardly reached his face.

Bess, crouching under the bush, which was a thorn, and holding her breath, saw Dan thrust his spade into the pile of earth beside the hole, catch something that Isaac threw to him, and bend his broad shoulders over the pit. The light from the lantern fell on his black and frowsy head and the swelling curves of his hairy forearms. Bess heard the click of a shooting lock. Dan reached deep into the hole and swung something that jingled on to the grass. Then he stood up, wiping his forehead with

his forearm, and staring round into the darkness of the woods.

Isaac had reached for the bag of money when Bess, who was drawing back into the deeper shadow, set her hand on a dead thorn-bough. The spikes stabbed her palm. With the sudden pain of it she drew her breath in through her teeth with a slight and sibilant sound. She crouched down behind the thorn-bush, but both Dan and Isaac had heard her. The elder man was peering right and left like an old hawk, Dan stooping a little and staring straight to where Bess lay hid. He picked up the lantern and came striding round the edge of the glade, looking fiercely into the dark. Isaac had snatched up the gun and cocked it.

Bess, crouching behind the thorn-bush, trembled like a frightened hare. Dan was only twenty paces away, the lantern darting out arms of light into the forest. He would certainly see her if he passed the place, and with the swift instinct of the moment she chose the instant fortune of flight. Starting up like a wild thing from cover, she scurried back among the trees and took the winding path by which they had come.

Dan, giving a snort like a startled horse, dropped the lantern, flung up one arm, and plunged after her. He had seen the dark figure flit in among the trees, and could hear the crackling of twigs under her hurrying feet. With his mouth open and his hands clawing the air, he ran, rolling clumsily at the hips like a fat ketch in a heavy sea. Bess had twenty yards start of him and no more, and, quick and strong as she was, her skirts and cloak hindered her.

Bess heard him thudding in her wake, breathing hard like an angry bull. The trees sped by, solemn and untroubled, the winding path seemed to have no ending. Plod, plod, plod, came the heavy foot-falls at her heels till she felt like a child chased by an ogre. Strain as she would she could not outpace the man, and she knew enough of Dan's doggedness to guess the end.

After all, why should she run from her own husband? She had merely caught him uncovering money in the forest, and there was no reason why he should suspect her. Halting suddenly and struggling for her breath, with her hands to her bosom, she stood in the middle of the path and laughed a shrill, breathless laugh as the man came up with her.

"Ha, Dan, I have led you a dance, hey!"

Dan stopped dead with a great oath, then came close to her, panting, and glaring in her face.

"What be you doing in the forest, you she-dog?"

"I may follow my husband when he goes hunting."

Dan, with a curse, lifted up his great fist, struck her in the face, and bent over her as she lay half-stunned by the blow.

XXXV

Dan dragged Bess up by the wrist, and, seeing that she was dazed and faint, let her lean for a moment against a tree. The girl had been half stunned by the blow he had given her; blood was trickling from her mouth, her head drooping upon her bosom.

Dan, who was biting his nails and looking the creature of fury and indecision, turned on her at last, and, taking her by the cloak, dragged her back along the path. Bess had no spirit left in her for the moment. Faint, dizzy, and unable to think, she was yet conscious of the fact that she was utterly at her husband's mercy. Dan dragged her along roughly, cursing her when she stumbled, and shifting his grip from her cloak to her arm. She felt his fingers bruising the flesh as he gripped the muscles, grinding his teeth and shaking her now and again as though she were a child.

Dan brought his wife to the Monk's Grave again. From afar they saw the light of the lantern blinking through the forest, for Isaac had relit it and was standing on guard with his gun at full-cock. Dan gave a shout as he dragged Bess through the undergrowth, careless of how the boughs and briers smote and scratched her face. Isaac came limping up the glade towards them, the lantern in one hand, the gun in the other.

"Who be it, Dan?" he asked.

Dan laughed and held the girl out at arm's-length towards his father. Isaac lifted the lantern. The light flashed upon Bess's face with its wild and shadowy eyes and bleeding mouth.

"Bess!"

"A pretty trick she's been playing us, father."

"Odds my life, how much have you seen, wench—how much have you seen?"

He set the lantern down, seized Bess by the bosom of her gown, and shook her.

"Speak, you she-dog, what were you spying on us for?"

Bess shivered and her lips twitched.

"I followed Dan," she said.

"The deuce—you did!"

"I saw him throw the money out."

She broke suddenly into half-hysterical laughter, the mirthless and uncontrollable laughter of one unnerved by shock. Isaac threw her back from him so roughly that she reeled and staggered against Dan. Bess felt her husband's hands over her bosom, gripping her so that she stood with her back to him and could not

move. Isaac was limping to and fro before them, handling his gun, flashing now and again a fierce look at Bess. For the moment she understood but vaguely what was passing in the old man's mind.

Isaac faced them suddenly, his eyes glinting from a net-work of wrinkles.

"Stand aside, lad," he said, his fingers contracting about the stock of the gun.

Bess felt Dan's arms tighten about her body.

"What be ye thinking of, father?" he asked.

"Stand aside."

Bess, with a sudden flash of dread, understood the fierce purpose in him, and her terror swept away all other feelings for the instant. She twisted herself round in Dan's arms and clung to him desperately, looking up into his face.

"No, no," she panted, "hold me, Dan; dear God, don't let the old man shoot me."

Dan's arms were fast about her, and he faced his father, who was poking the gun forward and licking his lips.

"Odd's my life, stand aside from the she-dog."

Dan kept his post, feeling the pressure of his wife's arms and the terror of her appealing face.

"Put the gun down, father," he said.

Isaac hesitated. Bess cast a rapid glance at him over her shoulder.

"I'll not tell," she said. "I'll not tell."

Dan still held her fast and kept his eyes fixed on his father's face.

"Put the gun down," he said, with a hoarse oath.

Isaac lowered the muzzle and came a step nearer to his son.

"Ye great fool," he said, "will ye trust to a woman's word!"

"I'll not have ye shoot my wife like a dog," quoth the younger man, fierce with the pride of ownership.

Isaac uncocked the gun and threw it from him with a curse.

"As ye will, as ye will," he said, limping rapidly to and fro in his agitation. "I have heard o' kings losing their crowns from the curse of a woman's tongue."

Dan had freed Bess. He sprang forward and picked up the gun.

"Ye shall not be doing murder this night, father," he said.

The dawn was creeping up over Pevensel when Isaac, Dan, and Bess came through the woods towards the hamlet. The forest was full of mist and silence, vague and ghostly vapor standing in the glades. The stars sank back as the gray light increased in the vault above. Then came the first whimper of a waking bird, followed as by magic by the shrill piping from a thousand throats. The whole vast wilderness seemed to grow great with sound. The trees stood as though listening, their huge polls shrouded in mysterious vapor. From the east a gradual glory of gold

swam up into the heavens, flashing over the misty hills, touching all the dewy greenness of the woods with light.

Isaac limped along in front, sniffing the air, and darting rapid glances from side to side. Bess and her husband followed him, the girl white and silent, her black hair in a tangle, her eyes dark with the perilous fortune of the night. She walked wearily, looking neither to the right hand nor the left, but watching old Isaac limping in the van. Dan, dour and sullen, strode at her side, his gun over one shoulder, spade and pick over the other.

Not till he reached his own doorway did Isaac turn and face the two who followed him. He gave a fierce glance at Bess, a questioning look at Dan, and, unlocking the door of the cottage, went in without a word. They heard the merry whimpering of the dog, the jingle of money, the sound of the old man rummaging in a cupboard. When he came out again there were pistols in his belt.

"Take her home, lad," he said, curtly.

Dan nodded Bess towards the cottage beyond the orchard. She walked on slowly, Dan setting himself beside his father as they followed under the trees. Bess heard them talking together in undertones, the old man's voice suave and insinuating, Dan's gruff and obstinate. When they came through the garden, with its monthly roses dashed with dew and all its green life fragrant and full of a summer freshness, Dan laid a hand on Bess's shoulder, unlocked the door, and pushed her over the threshold. He bade her sit down in the heavy oak chair, while Isaac sank with a tired grunt on the settle by the window. Dan brought Bess a mug of water and a hunch of bread and commanded her to eat. She obeyed mechanically, wondering what they were going to do with her. Isaac and his son watched her in silence.

When she had made a meal, Dan went out to the shed behind the cottage and brought back some fathoms of stout cord. He ordered Bess to hold out her hands. There was no sign of hesitation on his sullen, black-bearded face. He tied Bess's hands together, bound her about the body and the ankles to the chair, Isaac watching with silent satisfaction. When Dan had bound her thus he went out with his father, locking the door after him, and left Bess to the fellowship of her thoughts.

Isaac turned into his cottage for a moment to count out the eighty guineas he had promised Ursula and to lock the rest of the gold in his strong box at the bottom of the oak hutch. He did not doubt that the money would put the old lady in the best of tempers, and that he could safely confide in her concerning Bess. Isaac rejoined Dan in the garden, and they moved away towards Ursula's cottage whose stone-wall and thatched roof showed amid the dark trunks and drooping branches of the pines. The old woman was in bed when Isaac knocked at the door. A lattice opened overhead, and a red beak and a pair of beady eyes under a pink night-cap appeared, with a few wisps of gray hair falling about a yellow and skinny neck. Isaac spoke a few words to her and jingled the money. The face popped in again and they heard Ursula hobbling down the stairs. She had tied on a red petticoat and thrown a black shawl over her shoulders. Isaac went into her when she had unbolted the door, leaving Dan

leaning against the wall with his hands deep in his breeches-pockets.

Isaac remained with the old woman half an hour or more, the sound of their voices stealing out on the morning silence. He appeared in the best of tempers when he emerged from the cottage, slapped Dan on the shoulder, and limped away with him towards the hamlet, smiling to himself as though pleased with his own cleverness.

"The money's tickled her into a good temper, lad," he said. "I told her about the wench, and she took it very quiet."

Dan cocked an eye shrewdly at his father.

"We waste a powerful lot of patience on the women," he retorted.

Isaac wagged his head and looked particularly wise and saintly for the moment.

"I reckon we'd better shift the money," he said.

As they rounded the corner of Ursula's cow-house Isaac's glance lighted on a man who was standing in the garden before his cottage. The fellow was busy throwing pebbles at the upper casements, imagining that the owner was still asleep within. As Dan and Isaac crossed the open stretch of grass-land that ran like a broad highway through the hamlet, the man standing in the garden caught sight of them as he turned to gather a fresh handful of pebbles from the path. He looked at them suspiciously for the moment, then waved his cap and came striding towards them over the grass. He was a rough, strongly built fellow, with the keen yet foxy air of a born poacher, his bushy brown beard and whiskers hiding fully half of his red and sun-tanned face.

"Hallo, Jim! What brings you this way, eh?"

The man grinned, and glanced first at Isaac and then at Dan.

"It be probable, Master Grimshaw, that we shall be running the 'osses' through to-morrow."

"So—so!"

"Mus Garston be a-wanting to see ye both down at Thorney Chapel. There be a fat load comin' through, and Mus Garston he'll share like a gentleman."

Isaac's gray eyes gave that peculiar twinkle that told those who knew him that he was in the sweetest of tempers. He was never backward where money might be made, and he had no objection to cheating the Customs occasionally, provided that the adventure was worth the risk. Mus Garston was one of the finest land smugglers on the southern coast—a keen, black-eyed fellow, who loved the game better than he loved his soul. Bess, too, was safe, bound to the chair in Dan's cottage. They could join Garston's men and leave the girl to be dealt with at their leisure.

"We'll come, Jim," he said. "Come in and have a bite of food and a pull at the ale-pot."

The poacher capped Isaac, for Grimshaw was a man of some circumstance among the night-moths of Pevensel. They went, the three of them, into Isaac's

cottage, and were soon gossiping over their bacon, brown bread, and ale. When they had ended the meal, Isaac whispered a few words into his son's ear, and Dan, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, marched off to his cottage to look at Bess.

He found her much as they had left her, sitting stiffly in the chair, and gazing out of the window. Her face brightened a little when Dan entered, and she tried to smile at him as though for welcome. The man appeared in no mood to pity her. He felt the cords about her wrists and ankles, stared at her a moment in silence, stroking his beard with the palm of his hand.

"Dan," she said, with a wistful drooping of the mouth.

Her husband's dark eyes were hard and without light.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Do with ye?"

"Yes."

Dan frowned as he turned towards the door.

"Keep ye from playing more tricks," he said. "You will bide there safe, I reckon, till we come back."

Bess said never a word to him, but it was with a sinking heart that she heard Dan shut and lock the door. What would they do with her when they returned? Of a surety she had discovered some great secret that had lain hid in the deeps of Pevensel. What if her meddling should bring her to her death?

XXXVI

An hour passed, dragging its linked minutes like a snake crawling lazily in the long grass under the summer sun.

Bess, bound fast to the chair, sat like one weak after a long illness, the sunlight falling on the floor, to be reflected upon the brown beams of the old room. The girl's face looked white and apathetic against the dark background of an old linen-press. Her eyes stared out steadily through the window at the green woods bathed in sunshine, and the white clouds sailing slowly north across the infinite azure of the June sky. The life fire had burned low in her since Dan had struck her down in the woods. The shock of the night had not yet lifted from her heart. Old Isaac's pitiless gray eyes still haunted her, and she remembered the gleam of the barrel of the gun.

This same evening she was to have met Jeffray at Holy Cross, and the thought stirred the blood in her a little. She lay back in the chair, resting her head upon the rail, and taking her breath in deeply with slow, sighing inspirations. The memories of her last meeting with Jeffray began to work in her with quickening force. All the sweet complicity of the plot set the cords of her heart vibrating. If he but knew, if he had but guessed how Dan had treated her! If he were only wise as to her present peril!

With the increasing sense of her own powerlessness the spirit of revolt in her waxed but the more importunate. Why should she be made the creature of this man's passions? She seemed to feel again the great fist, swinging with all the brutality of the man's nature, and crashing into her face. All the ignominies of the past weeks rose up to taunt and madden her. All her hate and loathing waxed fiercer as she thought of her helpless yearning towards Jeffray. She began to struggle and twist in the chair, striving to get her teeth to the knots about her wrist. Dan had fastened them down to the front stretcher of the chair, and wrestle and strain as she would she could not reach them.

What could she do to free herself from the shame and the dread that encompassed her? Scream! Yes, but who would hear her, and who would help her if they heard? Ursula? Poor doddering Ursula! Doubtless she had been locked safely in her cottage, and Bess mistrusted the old woman's courage when Isaac's will had been declared law. Incensed the more by her own thoughts, she struggled again and again with the cords, twisting and straining till the oak chair rocked and creaked. The muscles stood out under the brown skin of her forearms. Her bruised lips began to bleed again as she held her breath, struggling and working her body from side to side.

Another hour passed. The bees droned on, the smell of the garden came in upon the breeze. Not a voice reached her from the hamlet. Silence prevailed save for the

murmur of the insects, the vague rustling of the leaves, the steady, mocking tick of the old clock against the wall. The woods rolled up before her, their green splendor heightened by the blaze of the June sunlight. The very calm of the place seemed to intensify the passionate despair in her own heart.

Suddenly some new sound drifted to Bess's ears. She twisted forward in the chair, straining at the cords. Some one was moving towards the cottage; Bess heard the rustle of feet in the long grass. Was it Dan returning, or old Isaac with those pistols in his belt? The footsteps stopped at the garden-gate. Bess could see neither the gate nor the path from where she sat. The latch lifted; some one was coming up the brick-paved path. She heard the sound of breathing, the sound of a hand trying the locked door. For a moment silence held. Then with the rustling of clothes against the wall of the cottage a round-backed figure showed blurred by the sunlight at the window, a hook-nosed face looked in at Bess through the open lattice.

It was Ursula.

Bess, leaning forward in the chair, stared at the old woman with a swift flooding of blood into her face.

"Is that you, mother?"

Instinctively she had chosen the word that she had used to Ursula when she was a child. There was a husky and vibrating wistfulness in the voice that seemed to carry strange and simple pathos.

Ursula was standing at the window, wringing her hands together. For two hours past she had been the creature of indecision, halting between fear of Isaac and great dread of the hints that the old man had cast into her ears.

"Mother!"

Ursula began to whimper as she looked in at the girl, the impotence of her dotage showing in her face.

"What!—they have bound ye to the chair?"

"I can't stir, mother."

"Oh, dear Lord! what shall I do?"

"Are we alone?"

"They be all away save Solomon," she answered.

Bess's face strained painfully towards the window.

"Where is Solomon?" she asked.

Ursula still twisted her hands together and peered round her suspiciously.

"Chopping firewood in his shed. I slipped round through the trees. Lord o' mercy, what's to be done—what's to be done!"

Bess's strength of purpose increased with Ursula's indecision.

"Mother," she said, in a whisper.

"Ay, child."

“Ye’ve always been kind to me. Will ye let them bury me in the forest with a bullet in my heart?”

Ursula began to sway to and fro, pressing her hands to her bosom, whimpering and muttering like one demented.

“Why did ye meddle, Bess—why did ye meddle?”

“Isaac wanted to shoot me by the Monk’s Grave.”

“He be a fierce man, be Isaac.”

“Dan stood for me then; he’ll not stand for me again. Isaac will shoot me; I’ve seen death in his eyes.”

Ursula stretched herself across the window-sill with her head between her hands. Her distress was pitiable in its impotence. Bess watched her, realizing that her one hope rested on the feeble and faltering courage of this crooked and half-witless creature.

“Mother,” she said, hoarsely.

Ursula darted up her head and looked at Bess.

“Climb in through the window.”

“Lord have mercy on me, how can a poor old cripple climb in to ye?”

“Mother, you must.”

“I can’t, I can’t, wench; how can I?”

“Try, now try for Bess’s sake. My blood will be upon you if Isaac has his way.”

The words seemed to strike Ursula full in the face. She stood shaking, blinking her eyes, and working her loose, inturned lips together. Then she thrust her arms over the sill, gripped the wooden ledge within, and tried to drag herself to the level of the window. Bess watched the wrinkled and trembling head straining forward upon its yellow neck. The sinews stood out in the sticks of forearms, the feet scraped and worked against the wall. Slowly Ursula dragged herself up and through so that she could get one knee upon the ledge. She lay there panting a moment, looking at Bess.

“Quick, mother, quick!”

Ursula drew her left knee up on to the window-ledge, knelt, and, getting on her feet, crouched half within the opening of the lattice. There was a wooden stool under the window. Ursula caught one foot in her petticoat in the descent, lurched forward, and came tumbling on the floor. Her forehead struck the brick-work heavily. For a moment she lay groaning and twitching, Bess gazing at her in an agony of helpless dread.

Ursula was shaken but not stunned. She struggled up on her hands and knees, looking round her with a vacant pathos that might have appeared ludicrous at any other time. Bess was bending forward in the chair.

“Quick, mother, a knife!”

Ursula picked herself up, and went tottering round the room, holding her head between her hands. She moved to the dresser, dragged out one drawer after another, and came back at last with a horn-handled knife in her hand. Bess never shifted her eyes from the old woman's face.

"My wrist, here, the cord—cut it."

Ursula tumbled on her knees, sawed at the rope shakily, and stabbed Bess's wrist in her clumsy fright. The sight of blood startled her. She dropped the knife, and sat on her heels, gaping at Bess.

"Cut the rope, mother; ye haven't hurt me."

Ursula picked up the knife and sawed at the cord again, Bess straining at it to keep it taut. Blood was trickling slowly down her fingers; that was nothing. Strand by strand the thin rope gave under the edge of the knife. A last twist of the girl's strong arm and her hand was free.

She took the knife from Ursula instantly, cut the cords about her other wrist and ankles, careless of how she hurt herself in her haste. A stifled cry came from Ursula as Bess rose free of the oak chair. The old woman had tottered forward and fallen in a faint upon the floor.

Bess stood staring at her in mute vexation, then went on her knees beside her, turning Ursula upon her back, and chafing her hands. The old woman gave no single sign of consciousness, but lay there with her mouth open and her eyes shut, the pallor of her face contrasting with the red bricks in the floor. Bess gazed at her, hesitating. What should she do? Leave Ursula to Isaac's anger, and take time and its precious fortune to herself? Solomon Grimshaw might be hanging about the cottage; every moment Bess thought to see a face looking at her through the open lattice.

Desperate, she ran to the window and looked out. The garden seemed asleep in the sunshine; no one was to be seen. In the distance she fancied she could catch the sharp play of Solomon's bill as he split the pine-boughs in his woodshed. With necessity for her inspiration, she turned back to Ursula, lifted her easily in her strong arms, carried her to the window, and lowered her unceremoniously by her skirts into the garden. Then she climbed out after her, picked Ursula up again, for she was nothing but a sack of skin and bone, and, passing round to the back of the garden, broke away into the woods that rose close about the cottage. Casting a half circle through the trees, breathing hard through her set teeth, and stopping often to listen, she drew towards Ursula's cottage with the woman still unconscious in her arms. Interminable minutes seemed to pass before she came through the pine-thickets to the cottage, raised the latch of the door, and carried Ursula within.

Bess laid her down on the settle before the fire, and, kneeling, saw that Ursula showed signs of a return to consciousness. The eyes opened, the hands groped out towards the girl's face. Bess bent and kissed the old woman upon the mouth.

"Mother, mother—"

Ursula stared at her vacantly as though trying to remember what had happened.

Bess gave her no moment to delay. She was fearful, and grew more fearful each instant of Dan's return.

"See, I have brought you back to your own cottage," she said; "now—I must go. Remember, when Isaac comes back—you know nothing, you have not been near Dan's house. They may think I broke free by myself."

Ursula nodded, sighed, and put her hands to her head.

"I've saved ye, child," she said.

"God bless you for it, mother! I must go."

Bess kissed Ursula again, smoothed her gray hair for her, and, starting up, turned towards the door. She closed it softly after her, and, looking round warily, darted across the open stretch of grass-land for the farther woods. She would take the path for the Beacon Rock, strike across the heath, and reach the road for Rodenham. Her one hope of safety was with Jeffray. He would defend her against Isaac and against Dan.

Bess had barely reached the trees when Solomon Grimshaw sauntered out from the woodshed, wiping his forehead with his bare forearm. He caught sight of Bess as she slipped into the woods, gave a shout, and started after her. Bess heard the shout, stopped, and glanced back over her shoulder. She saw Solomon running towards her, shaking his fist. One look was sufficient. Bess gathered up her skirts and ran, her gray cloak melting away amid the trees, her ankles in their red stockings flashing under her green petticoat. Solomon was but a lame old horse; she could out-distance him easily in the woods.

XXXVII

That same evening while Bess sat bound in Dan's cottage in the deeps of Pevensel, there was much weighing of words in the dining-room at Hardacre.

Dr. Jessel, rector and chaplain, sat at the polished table, with paper, ink, and pouncet-box before him, and a much-nibbled quill in his fist. For years he had acted as the confidential scribe and scholarly supervisor of letters to the household of Hardacre, and he had been called in that morning to prepare a certain epistle, guided by the baronet's personal discretion. Sir Peter faced the parson across the table, and advised him magisterially as to the contents of the letter.

Mr. Lancelot was pacing the room behind his father's chair, cocking his sword under his coat-tails, expanding his chest and swinging his shoulders with an air of exuberant self-satisfaction. He appeared to feel no little contempt for Parson Jessel and the baronet as they squabbled and argued over the phrasing of this momentous letter. The parson's classic and elegant style was not flexible and fierce enough to adapt itself to Sir Peter's temper. The chaplain was a diplomat and a literary sycophant by nature. His Ciceronian taste revolted from Sir Peter's blunt and brutal methods of expression.

The baronet leaned back at last with his thumbs in his waistcoat-pockets, hiccoughed, and regarded Jessel with evident irritation.

"Put it down, Jessel," he said; "put it down—I say. I ain't going to draw my ale mild for fear of scalding the young scoundrel's stomach. Call a blackguard a blackguard, sir, when he deserves it. You're too damned polite, Jessel. Give it him hot on the last page. I'm right there, ain't I, Lot?"

Mr. Lancelot came to a halt behind his father's chair, fixed his eyes on the parson's face, and upheld Sir Peter.

"Put in plenty of brimstone, Jessel," he said. "Rub it in, man—rub it in."

"That's the tune, Lot," said the baronet, warmly. "I'm dry to the lungs with haggling with ye. Confound this scholarly niceness, I say! Call a cur a cur, sir, and have done with it."

The chaplain screwed up his mouth with a whimsical expression of resignation, shook his wig, and put pen to paper. He scratched away for a minute or so to the baronet's dictation, finished with a flourish, shook the pouncet-box over the page, and leaned back in his chair with the letter in his hand.

"Shall I read the epistle to you, gentlemen?" he asked, clearing his throat.

"Ay, fire away," quoth Sir Peter; "it ought to be as good as swearing at the young devil in person."

Dr. Jessel proceeded to the reading of the letter with full nasal unction, striving

to crush its literary crudities beneath an episcopalic diction. Sir Peter twinkled and beamed, gurgling and patting his stomach suggestively when some very palatable sentence tickled his native sense of humor. Mr. Lot leaned his elbows on the back of his father's chair, and joined heartily in the old gentleman's enjoyment of the word-feast. At the conclusion of Dr. Jessel's essay in declamation the baronet exploded with characteristic gusto.

"Deuce take it, sir, that ought to make the young devil shake in his shoes. He'll feel a bit liverish after our brimstone, Jessel, eh? Seal it up, man. And may a good lifter on the rump go with it."

The chaplain sealed up the letter gracefully, and delivered it with a bow to Mr. Lot.

"May you shine, sir," he said, "as the noble Achilles shone before Troy."

Mr. Lot swaggered to the sideboard, poured himself out a glass of wine, and tossed it down with an emphatic tilt of the elbow.

"You'll do, Lot—you'll do," said the baronet.

Mr. Hardacre appeared troubled by no doubts as to the triumph of his cause.

"The lad will just crawl, sir," he said; "he ain't fit for anything but scribbling verses."

Love and hate being thus romantically mingled, Bess's woodland tenderness and Jilian's sickly spite, Providence, that cup-bearer to kings and peasants, prepared to deliver the goblet into Jeffray's hands. Nor was there a league between the two influences as they approached the man that day; Bess skipping brown-footed over the heather, the Hardacre coach rolling with its heroic burden over the rough and dusty road.

Richard Jeffray, abandoning Wilson to Butler's "Hudibras" and a pipe of Virginia in the library, had turned out to wander in the park. He was to meet Bess at Holy Cross that evening, and the vexed riddle with him was the riddle of the future. The thunder-cloud that he knew must be gathering at Hardacre loomed to his imagination across the northern sky. He would see the lightnings of the Sussex Zeus flashing vengeance out of the heavens. Lot Hardacre was not the demigod to remain idle for lack of bluster. He would descend upon Rodenham, strut and swagger, ruffle it like any scoundrel modelled upon the manhood of old White Friars.

The Hardacre problem was plain enough to him; its solution rested on a frank flouting of Mr. Lancelot's tyranny. With Bess, however, Jeffray's thoughts found themselves groping through twilight towards a distant dawn. The play had opened with all the fair inevitableness that makes for tragedy. How was it to be developed? Above all, how was it to end? Three alternatives met Jeffray at the moment. Renunciation, mere intrigue, and a grand defying of the gods.

Turning back at last towards the house, whose tall chimney-stacks and gables glimmered between the chestnuts and the cedars of the park, Jeffray followed a path that led by a rough bridge over a brook into a short stretch of woodland on the side

of the hill. It appeared to be a fragment of the old forest of the weald that had escaped through the centuries from the iron-founder's furnaces. The oaks stood at a noble distance from one another, the short and mighty boles breaking into the giant grandeur of their knotted limbs. The sweeping canopies of foliage rolled and met from tree to tree. Beneath them bracken grew. Beyond, panels of blue sky and silvery landscape closed in this sylvan temple of old Time.

As Jeffray idled through the wood he heard a voice calling him suddenly by name. The cry startled him as though it had echoed the voices of his inmost thoughts. He started back, looked, and saw a woman's figure moving towards him under the trees. She came on swiftly, a kind of tired endurance on her face, her eyes turned steadily towards him, like the eyes of one straining towards sanctuary. It was Bess.

Jeffray felt the hot blood streaming to his face. He went forward to meet her, the green-wood filling for him with a double mystery. Bess held out a hand towards him. He saw that she looked white and tired, her eyes shining in her pale face with the fever of some strong emotion. He marked her bruised lips, the strip of blood-stained linen round her wrist. The girl's face told him that something grim had happened.

She came straight to him with no hesitating look, came to him as though he were the one man on earth whom she could trust. Her strength seemed to fail her when she was within reach of Jeffray's hands. She tottered and caught her breath. In a moment the man's arms were holding her. The impulse justified him, as did the tired head that drooped towards his shoulder.

"What has happened, Bess? Tell me everything."

Jeffray's eyes had lost all the shadows of indecision. The girl was leaning on him, trusting her womanhood within his arms.

"Bess."

"Ah—!"

It was a great sigh of contentment that escaped her. Jeffray's arms drew yet closer. He would not have loosed her at that moment had twenty Lots set their swords at his throat.

"Tell me, Bess, what has happened."

He spoke with the quiet tenderness of a man sure of his own strength. She turned up her face and looked at him wearily, yet with a shimmer of mystery in her eyes.

"I have half-discovered a secret."

"The brooch?"

"I cannot tell the meaning of it yet. They caught me, Dan and Isaac, watching them uncovering money in the woods. It was last night, and I had followed Dan, and Isaac tried to shoot me, but Dan saved me then."

"Yes, yes."

“They brought me back to the cottage, and left me tied to a chair. Ursula came and cut the rope while they were away, and so—I escaped and came to you.”

She hung with a kind of happy languor in the man’s arms now that her heart could unburden itself of all bitterness. The mouth had softened and was no longer petulant. Their eyes held each other in one long, steady look. Neither desired to have it otherwise.

“Bess.”

She thrilled a little, and colored under her brown skin.

“You are safe with me.”

“You will not send me away? You will not send me away?”

Jeffray drew a deep breath, and knew in his heart that the riddle was solving itself as he had prayed.

“How can I send you away from me?” he said.

“Mr. Jeffray!”

“Do you not know? My God, I ought not to speak to you like this! And yet—I cannot help myself.”

She turned suddenly in his arms, red to the bosom.

“It is the dream,” she said. “We cannot help it; no, we cannot kill the truth.”

“The dream?”

“The dream I had on the saint’s night of you at Holy Cross. It has come true, in spite of Dan. I would not change it for all the gold in the wide world.”

Suddenly she put Jeffray’s arms gently away from her, and drew apart with a simple dignity that preserved her womanhood from any air of wantonness. Jeffray felt the subtle change in her, and respected her the more for it.

He took his inspiration from her on the instant.

“Bess,” he said, “do with me what you will. My honor is yours. You will trust me?”

She smiled at him, a soft light of pride and joy shining in her eyes.

“I will do all that you tell me,” she answered, with a sense of dependence.

“You are tired.”

“No, not now.”

So engrossed were they with each other that neither Bess nor Jeffray had heard the distant sound of wheels as the Hardacre coach rolled up from the lodge-gates towards the priory. The road was hidden from the two in the oak-wood. Only the gables and the tall chimneys showed between the trunks of the trees.

Jeffray took the path that led through beech-thickets to the north wall of the great garden. Bess set herself at his side as though this slightly built man held the threads of her fate firmly in his delicate yet sinewy hands. They walked together

under the trees with the sunlight splashing through the fresh, green foliage, Bess telling Jeffray of her night's adventure in Pevensel, and of the perils she had dared thereby.

They crossed the wooded hollow of the park, and entered the garden by a little gate in the red brick wall. To Jeffray the whole passage seemed a dream—strange, tragic, yet infinitely sweet. His hand touched Bess's as they walked side by side amid the rose-trees. His fingers closed on hers for one swift moment, tightened as his eyes met hers, and then relaxed with pure regret. They approached the stairway leading to the terrace, holding a little apart, yet very conscious of each other's nearness.

On the top step of the stair Jeffray halted suddenly. A coach was standing on the gravel drive before the house. On the terrace, not twenty paces away, and walking towards them, came Lot Hardacre with Mr. Robert Beaty at his side. Jeffray turned to Bess, but realized in an instant that all hope of concealment had gone. He pointed her to a stone seat at the end of the terrace, and, gathering his dignity, walked on to meet Lot Hardacre.

XXXVIII

Jeffray came to a halt before Mr. Lancelot, who flourished his hat, made his cousin a stiff bow, as though he were saluting an acknowledged enemy.

"I have the honor, sir, to wish you a very good-morning. I must apologize"—and Mr. Lot chuckled—"for disturbing you with the lady yonder. Mr. Jeffray—Mr. Robert Beaty, permit me to introduce you to each other."

The two gentlemen bowed with the most perfect gravity. Jeffray held himself very upright after the salute, his lips compressed into a straight line.

"And for what purpose, gentlemen," he said, striking straight at the heart of the matter, "am I indebted for the pleasure of your presence here at Rodenham?"

Jeffray's composure did not appear to trouble Mr. Hardacre for a moment. He expected a certain measure of impudence from his cousin, seeing that he had a trim waist and a plumb figure to inspire him. Lot nodded to Mr. Beaty, and signed to him to withdraw. The useful supernumerary received the hint in silence, and strolling away towards the end of the terrace, amused himself by staring hard at Bess.

Lot Hardacre drew Sir Peter's epistle from his pocket, and handed it to Richard with a bow.

"Be so good as to read it," he said, bluntly.

Jeffray, imagining its contents, broke the seal and ran his eyes rapidly over Dr. Jessel's elegant sentences. He colored a little as he read the letter, the declamatory abuse spreading itself before him, the charges of cowardice and dishonor awakening in him a feeling of quiet contempt. Jeffray read the letter through without one single shock of compunction or of shame. He folded it up again composedly, knowing that Lot was watching him, and taking therefore a pride in flouting his cousin's curiosity.

"I am much honored by Sir Peter Hardacre's bad opinion of me," he said, tearing the letter in pieces and scattering them upon the stones.

Mr. Lot's red face grew a shade redder.

"The devil you are?" he answered.

"It is very evident, sir, that a man of low character like myself, is—on your father's showing—utterly unworthy of approaching Miss Hardacre with a view to matrimony."

"Then, sir, you admit the truth of the charges made in my father's letter?"

Jeffray kept his eyes fixed on his cousin's red and lowering face.

"I recognize none of these charges," he retorted, calmly, "for the simple reason that I feel myself justified by my own conscience. I do not love your sister, sir, I

have no intention of doing her the great wrong of perjuring myself by promising to marry her."

Mr. Lot took three strides to the left and three strides back again, as though setting to a partner in a dance. He turned and faced Jeffray again, his eyes glinting with anger, his clinched fists quivering with the inclination to dash itself in his kinsman's face.

"This is your answer, sir?" he said.

"My answer, Lot."

"Then, sir, I call you just what you are, a most infernal scoundrel."

Jeffray, cooling in contrast to his cousin's indignation, bowed to him, and condescended to smile.

"Thanks for your bad opinion, cousin," he said.

"Cousin, damn you, don't call me cousin! Tell me who the wench is who is making play for you over here."

Jeffray drew himself instantly.

"Let me advise you, sir," he said, "to refrain from repeating an insult to a woman's honor."

Mr. Lot gave a deep, ventral laugh, flashed a contemptuous look at his cousin, and cocked his thumb towards Bess.

"You needn't talk so fine about such baggage," he said.

"Lot Hardacre!"

"You can see the color of her stockings, eh? I tell you, Richard Jeffray, you have insulted my sister's affections, jilted her, sir, for a mere drab. Take it straight in the face."

Mr. Lot's fist lunged out suddenly, but Jeffray, who had been watching for the blow, sprang back out of the reach of his cousin's arm.

"Be careful," he said, whipping out his sword and presenting the point towards Mr. Lot, "I will run you through if you try any of your drayman's methods."

Lot glared at him and felt for his sword-hilt.

"Will you fight?" he roared.

"Readily."

"I'll give you a mark to remember, sir—by gad, I will!"

Jeffray bowed to him very quietly.

"Permit me to call my second," he said, "Mr. Richard Wilson is in the library."

"Fetch him out," growled the hero of the moment.

"The lawn below the terrace will serve us."

Jeffray turned, sword in hand, and entered the house. He crossed the hall, found Wilson reading in the library, and explained the affair to him in a few words. The

painter appeared distressed and by no means eager to further the quarrel. Jeffray smothered his objections, appealed to him as a friend, and soon had Wilson out upon the terrace. Mr. Beaty and Lot Hardacre were conferring together in undertones. On the seat at the end of the terrace sat Bess, looking restless and alert about the eyes. She started up when Jeffray reappeared with Wilson upon the terrace, and moved some paces towards him.

Jeffray, after introducing Wilson to Mr. Robert Beaty, withdrew with a slight bow and passed on to speak with Bess. Knowing that Lot Hardacre was watching him narrowly, he bore himself with all the courtliness he could command towards the girl, and pointed her back to the seat that she had just abandoned.

"I have a debt of honor to pay," he said, with a smile.

"You are going to fight that man?"

"Yes."

"Who is he? I hate him."

"I will tell you everything afterwards. Will you go into the house or stay here on the terrace?"

Their eyes met, and they stood looking at each other with a mute and indescribable tenderness.

"I will stay here," she said, at last.

"Well chosen," he answered her.

She held out her hands, stooping a little towards him, her face bathed in the dearness of her love.

"God keep you safe—"

"For your sake, Bess?"

"Yes, yes, for my sake, Mr. Richard."

Jeffray bent, took her hand, touched it momentarily with his lips. He turned and walked back to where the three gentlemen were waiting at the head of the stairway leading to the lawns. Bess had gone back to her seat against the balustrade. She knelt on it, pressing her hands to her bosom, her eyes following Jeffray as he passed down with the others from the terrace.

Mr. Beaty and Dick Wilson chose their ground immediately below the stairway where the old turf spread a crisp green under their feet. The swords were measured, and found to be of equal length. Lot Hardacre stripped off his red coat and gaudy waistcoat, gave them to his second, and rolled up his shirt-sleeves over his plump and muscular forearms. He threw his hat aside on the grass, wiped his right hand on his breeches, and took his sword from Mr. Beaty with a genial and meaning grin. Mr. Lot was at no loss for confidence and courage despite the proverbial cowardice of bullies. Undoubtedly he despised Jeffray, smiling rather contemptuously as he ran his eyes over his cousin's slim and graceful figure.

Jeffray had thrown aside his coat and waistcoat, and was standing facing Lot, in

black breeches, white silk stockings, and spotless shirt. The point of his sword rested on the grass. Wilson, who was looking at him anxiously, marked the firm, compressed mouth, the alert brightness in the dark eyes, the fine pose of the sinewy and agile figure. The lad was on his mettle, and looked as quiet and dangerous as any veteran. His simple directness of movement contrasted with Mr. Hardacre's shoulder-swinging swagger and all the flourish and gusto of his self-conceit.

They saluted and began. Bess, leaning on the balustrading of the terrace, with her chin between her hands, watched them as though magnetized. Lot Hardacre had opened the attack with a series of florid and rather clumsy passes that suggested more strength and bombast than clear skill. He smiled all the time, his mouth slightly open, his blue eyes agleam. Jeffray appeared in no way flustered by the hectoring vigor of his cousin's assault. He kept his temper and took the measure of his man, parrying all thrusts with an alertness and precision that betrayed how well he had profited by his schooling at The Wells.

It was not long before Lot Hardacre began to sweat. The expression on his round and buxom face changed remarkably. He smiled no longer, but looked puzzled and not a little impatient. Who the devil would have thought that this scholar fellow could make so good a fight of it? Instinctive and obstinate contempt got the better of Mr. Hardacre's temper. He began to fume and swear under his breath at finding Jeffray's sword ever at point against him. What, should he, Lot Hardacre, be kept playing by a mere lad who could do nothing but write poetry!

Losing his coolness and his self-restraint, he closed in on his cousin, and put yet more dash and spirit into his attack. Even to Bess's keen but uncritical eyes it seemed that the big man was no match for Jeffray in litheness and suppleness of wrist. Richard was swifter, cooler, defter on his feet. He carried himself as though he could go on fencing for an hour, while Lot, red and sweaty, stamped to and fro, grunting and laboring, setting his teeth, and breathing fiercely through his nostrils.

Suddenly the whole method of the bout changed. Jeffray's sword began to stab and glimmer, coming at every pass within perilous nearness to his cousin's skin. Lot Hardacre began to tire and give ground. He seemed flurried, bustled, winded, and out of heart. Jeffray pressed him harder than before, amused by the astonished fury on his cousin's face. He took his chance at last, and clinched the argument. Feinting, he lunged in under Lot's swerving blade, and ran him through the flesh of the right breast a hand's-breadth below the shoulder.

Lot Hardacre snarled like a hurt dog, staggered, and fell back against Mr. Beaty, who had sprung forward to catch him. A broadening patch of scarlet showed on the white shirt, and blood trickled down the wounded man's sword-arm. He recovered himself, thrust Bob Beaty off with an oath, and stood on guard. Jeffray, who was watching him with his point lowered, drew back and held his sword crosswise across his thigh.

"You are hard hit, Lot," he said; "you are not fit to fight again."

Mr. Hardacre ground his teeth and swore at him.

“Are you afraid?” he retorted.

“I warn you—”

“Damn you, put your point up.”

Lot made a dash at him, his mouth working, his eyes looking like the eyes of an angry dog. He thrust savagely at Jeffray, laboring with his breath, blood soaking his white shirt. Once his point grazed Jeffray, and for the moment Bess thought that the sword had passed through his body. Richard, losing patience at last as he realized the sincerity of his cousin’s hate, threw more fierceness into his play, and drove at Lot with swift good-will. For a minute or less there was a grim shimmering and shrilling of steel, a fine tussle fought out fiercely to a finish. Lot let fly a wild thrust, missed, over-reached himself, staggered as he tried to recover. In an instant Jeffray’s sword stabbed out in a flashing counter. The point smote Lot full in the chest.

Lot Hardacre gave a sharp, savage cry, faltered, and fell back two steps. His sword wavered helplessly in the air, his knees bent under him. Both Beaty and Wilson ran to catch him as he staggered and sank. The sword fell from his relaxed fingers. Jeffray, shocked at the sight of this strong man’s agony of defeat, threw his sword away, and bent over his cousin in generous distress.

“How is it with you, Lot?”

“A good quittance, and be damned to you.”

Bob Beaty knelt supporting Lot’s shoulders and pressing his hand over the frothing wound in the man’s chest.

“My God,” he said, “what fools! We brought no surgeon.”

Jeffray, who was looking down at his cousin with mute regret, turned suddenly, and, picking up Lot’s gaudy waistcoat, doubled it into a pad and thrust it into Beaty’s hand.

“Hold it over the wound,” he said; “we must get him into the coach. Drive to Stott’s house at Rookhurst. Quick, Dick, take his shoulders.”

Between them they lifted Lot Hardacre, gray-faced and bloody, weak as a sick child, and carried him up the stairway along the terrace to the coach. A frightened and shaking serving-man opened the coach door. They lifted Lot in as gently as they could, and laid him along the seat with his head resting against Bob Beaty’s shoulder. The serving-man slammed the door and climbed up to the seat behind the coach. The postilion whipped up his horses, and the clumsy carriage swung away on its great springs, leaving Jeffray and Dick Wilson watching it side by side from the terrace.

XXXIX

The anger had melted out of Jeffray's heart from the moment that he had helped to lift his cousin's body and bear it with Beaty and Wilson to the coach. The reaction was but the recoiling of a sensitive nature from the violence that had brought a strong man in anguish to the ground. He stood watching the coach as it rolled along between the trees casting up a cloud of summer dust that drifted idly over the long grass.

Wilson, understanding something of the regret that had seized upon his friend's mind, laid his hand upon Jeffray's shoulder.

"It was no fault of yours, Richard," he said, looking earnestly into Jeffray's face.

The younger man hung his head and sighed.

"He forced the quarrel on me, Dick."

"And what is more, sir, he had no intention of showing you much mercy. You cannot blame yourself for the poor devil's fury."

Jeffray turned at last and remembered Bess. He had almost forgotten her in the fierce emotions of the moment, and in the vision of Lot lying bleeding on the grass. She was still kneeling on the stone bench at the end of the terrace, her elbows on the balustrading, her face between her hands. Wilson's eyes were also fixed upon this solitary figure, suggesting in its bleak aloofness some tragic influence working silently upon the unfolding of the play. The painter glanced inquiringly at Jeffray, nor was the significance of the look lost upon his friend.

"I can trust you, Dick," he said.

"I hope so, sir. I have seen something of the world."

"Wait for me in the library."

Wilson nodded.

"I will be with you in an hour."

Jeffray, his shirt stained with Lancelot's blood, passed back down the stairway to the lawn, and took his coat from the sundial where he had left it. Bess followed him from the terrace, wondering what had caused the quarrel between Richard and the big man with the red face.

"Thank God, you are safe," she said, proud of him in her woman's way. "Why did you fight? Tell me; I do not understand."

Jeffray stooped and picked up the sword that lay on the grass where he had thrown it when Lot fell.

"Do you know who that man was?" he asked her.

"No."

"Lancelot Hardacre."

"Sir Peter's son?"

"Yes."

"Why did he come to quarrel with you?"

"Because I had refused to marry his sister."

They stood silent a moment, looking at each other, each knowing by intuition what was passing in the other's mind. A great weight of doubt had been lifted from Jeffray's heart. Life had taken a simpler meaning for him now that Lot Hardacre's blood had set the seal of enmity upon the past. The action of an hour had sundered him irretrievably from Jilian and brought him nearer to this child of the woods.

"Bess," he said, holding his sword between his hands, "I never loved this woman. Do you believe me when I tell you that?"

She colored, and her eyes flashed up to his.

"Yes, I believe it."

"It is you whom I love, Bess. Now, before God, I have told you the truth."

He set the sword by the point in the grass, reached out and took her hands.

"I want to do what is best for you," he said.

"I know—I know—"

"We have come to life's crossways, dear; give me a night to see my way."

She looked up fearlessly into his face.

"I trust you," she said, simply. "I trust you with all I have."

He led her across the terrace to the house, and into the blue parlor beyond the dining-room. There he left her by the open window with the scent of thyme and woodbine floating in upon the air.

Crossing the hall, Jeffray went into the great salon that had been of old the prior's parlor, and rang the bell for Peter Gladden. The butler, curious behind his respectful suavity, entered, to stare inquisitively at his master's white and determined face. The sword that had pierced Lot's body lay naked upon the table.

"Gladden."

The butler bowed.

"Tell your wife to prepare the best bedroom. See that everything is in order."

"Your servant, sir."

"Mrs. Elizabeth Grimshaw is to be my guest. Your wife must wait on her in person. Let her meals be served her in her bedroom. Your wife, Gladden, must sleep in the dressing-room that opens from Mrs. Grimshaw's room. Understand me in this, Gladden, that every command must be obeyed."

The butler, astonished, but too well disciplined to betray the feeling, bowed

again to his master and appeared all deference and submission.

"Gladden."

"Yes, sir."

"Let one single piece of disrespect be shown to this lady, and you and your wife are dismissed from my service instantly."

Jeffray found Dick Wilson sitting smoking at the open window of the library with his feet resting on the sill. He dropped his fat calves when Richard entered, and looked at him a little uneasily over his shoulder. Both men remembered the night of the Hardacre ball, when Wilson had confessed the truth of his old love affair with Miss Jilian. Jeffray felt that he could trust the painter, and he was in the spirit to treat him as a friend. Drawing up a chair beside Dick Wilson's, he sat himself down before the open window.

"You saw the girl on the terrace, Dick?" he asked.

Wilson turned restlessly in his chair, his chin sunk upon his shabby green waistcoat.

"I did," he said, quietly.

"Do you remember where you saw her before?"

The painter shook his head and frowned as though mystified.

"You remember the day we drove to Thorney Chapel?"

Wilson cocked one shrewd blue eye at Jeffray, and removed his pipe-stem from between his lips.

"You have set me thinking, sir," he said, suddenly.

"The girl on the terrace—"

"And the rebellious bride—"

"You realize the identity."

Simply and with no choosing of words, no rounding of sentences, Jeffray told Wilson the tale of Bess of the Woods, how she had been forced to marry Dan, and of the mystery that appeared to surround her birth. The painter sat hunched up in his chair, sucking at his pipe, and blowing out clouds of smoke. His rugged face was grave and sympathetically attentive; he grunted expressively from time to time, watching Jeffray with his keen and humorous blue eyes. The lad had developed, strengthened marvellously in these few weeks. Wilson had not yet escaped from the astonishment with which he had watched Lot Hardacre go down before Jeffray's rapid passes.

There was a short silence at the end of Jeffray's confessional. Wilson sat motionless in his chair, pulling at his pipe and staring out of the window.

"Well, sir, well?" he said at last.

Jeffray sprang up and began to pace the room. The telling of Bess's story seemed to have rendered the past more vivid and real to him, the passion of the

present more flowing and tumultuous.

"You are wondering what I am going to do?" he asked.

"Exactly, sir, exactly," said Wilson, bluntly, yet without cynicism.

Jeffray stayed his striding from wall to wall, and stood with one hand gripping the back of the painter's chair.

"The woman's life is in danger," he said.

Wilson nodded reflectively.

"Her husband has to be considered. She shall not go back to him."

Dick Wilson swung himself up out of his chair, and stood staring at Jeffray with a frown upon his face. The two men looked each other in the eyes without flinching.

"Doubtless you think me mad, Dick," said Jeffray, quietly.

Wilson bowed down his head and half turned towards the window. He laid his pipe upon the sill, thrust his hands into his breeches-pockets, and stood with sloped shoulders, the attitude of a man bowed down by thought. He appeared almost afraid of facing Jeffray. There was so much grimness in the dénouement that he flinched for the moment from hazarding an opinion.

"A grave step, sir," he said at last.

"Grave for us both, Dick."

"How much does the girl know?"

"She knows everything."

"Is she ready to be advised by you?"

"We have taken a night to search our hearts."

Wilson was not one of those creatures who carry their prejudices and opinions about with them like samples of snuff and insist on presenting them to friends and acquaintances. He was not a moral person in the ecclesiastical sense. A man of the world, he knew the thousand entanglements that are cast about those who dare to depart from the paths of propriety.

"Have you thought the matter over, sir?" he said at last, laying his hand with a look of affection on Jeffray's shoulder.

"I am ready to face it, Dick," he answered.

"It is a great lottery, sir—a great lottery."

Jeffray's lips twitched, but his face never lost its determination.

"I love this woman, Dick," he said, simply; "I would risk my immortal soul for her. How can I send her back to this brute of a husband? What have I to lose in Sussex? If poor Lot dies, I cannot rest here with his blood upon my hands. The girl's life, too, is in danger. They meant to shoot her, Dick—shoot her—by Heaven, that they shall not! How can I turn her away at such an hour?"

Wilson shook his head and stared sadly through the open window.

“It is a great lottery, lad,” he said—“a great lottery.”

Jeffray drew close to him and held out his hand.

“Then, Dick,” he said, “I can take my destiny like a brave man. Better to stand for the truth—than shirk it for a lie. May I call you still my friend?”

Wilson turned with something between a snort and a sigh.

“Egad, sir, I will remain your friend despite all the women in Christendom.”

And the two men shook hands.

Jeffray, remembering what had happened at the parsonage, and realizing that the Grimshaws of Pevensel were desperate men, determined to remain on the watch all night with pistols and a drawn sword on the table before him. Bess was alone in the great bedroom, sleeping in the very bed, with its carved pillars and red silk canopy, in which Jeffray had been born. Wilson stumped off to his room about midnight, after talking over with Jeffray the events of the day, and listening for the twelfth time to Richard’s passionate assertion that Bess had not come of a peasant stock.

When Wilson had taken his candle and gone to bed, Jeffray settled himself in the library, unlocked the bureau, and prepared for the composing of several letters. He wrote to the Lady Letitia at The Wells, informing her of the result of his quarrel with the Hardacres. He wrote also to Jilian a single letter, expressing his sorrow that he should have spilled her brother’s blood.

Feverish with the ever-flowing current of his thoughts, he went and seated himself before the open window of the library. The night was calm and windless, blessed by the faces of a thousand stars. The trees slumbered about the house; the scent of roses and of honeysuckle hung heavy on the air.

Jeffray turned and looked round the shadowy room. The candles on the table where the pistols lay were burning steadily towards their silver sockets. The books ranged close along the walls seemed to recall unnumbered memories of the past. There were the books he had loved and leaned over as a boy—Mandeville’s travels, old Froissart, Chaucer’s tales, Shakespeare, Milton, and *The Book of Martyrs*. There on the bureau lay the brown-covered Thomas à Kempis that had been daily in his dead father’s hands. Jeffray seemed to see the old man’s figure moving dimly in the dusk, with Roger, his black spaniel, at his heels. Poor Roger lay in the rose garden under a red rose-tree. The bent but stately figure in its black coat, white ruffles, and cravat, with the heavy peruke falling on either side of the pale and courtly face, had vanished hardly a year ago from the old house. Jeffray wondered like a child whether his father could see him still, whether he was grieved by his son’s madness.

As Jeffray watched on the dawn began to creep up into the eastern sky. The trees about the house, still wrapped in the mystery of the night, stood outlined against a broadening sheet of gold. The chanting of birds flooded up from the thickets; wild life began to wake; the stars sank back behind the deepening blue of day. Rabbits scurried over the dew-drenched grass-land of the park and came and went amid the bracken. Blackbirds bustled and chattered in the garden. The woods flashed and

kindled. Vapors of rose flushed the opalescent bosoms of the clouds.

Jeffray leaned his elbows on the window-sill and watched the deepening of the dawn. It was mysteriously strange to him, instinct with a new and prophetic beauty. How still the whole world seemed save for the singing of the birds! The garden, with its many colors of gold and scarlet, azure, purple, and white, spread itself like some rich tapestry for the coming of the daughters of the dawn. The great cedars still seemed asleep. The cypresses and yews were webbed with gold.

Jeffray started suddenly, and half turned in his chair. Some one was stirring in the silent house; he heard a door open, swift footsteps upon the stairs. They came down and down into the half darkness of the hall like light descending into some ancient tower. Jeffray sprang up and went towards the door. A flood of light streamed down through one of the traceried windows of the hall. It fell upon the stairway and the polished woodwork of the floor, making the black timber seem like glistening water.

Down the stairs came Bess. Her black hair was gathered up in masses about her pale and wistful face. Her eyes, that looked like the eyes of one who had been long awake, were turned yearningly towards him.

“Bess.”

She came more slowly down the last few steps, the sunlight falling on her face, her lips apart, her eyes shining.

“I could not sleep.”

She stood before him, breathing deeply, and gazing in his face.

“I could not sleep, and I felt that I must come to you. You told me that you would watch till the morning.”

Jeffray’s face was in the shadow, but there was no mistaking the expression thereon.

“I have made up my mind, Bess,” he said.

She looked at him, gave a low cry, and stretched out her hands.

“You will not send me back to him!”

“No.”

“Let me be your servant—anything; do not send me away. I will go with you anywhere. I will go with you to the end of the world.”

So the dawn came for them, while in Pevensel Dan and old Isaac had been toiling through the night. They had taken the treasure-chest from the Monk’s Grave and buried it deep in the woods towards Holy Cross. They knew that Bess had fled to Rodenham, for Solomon had followed her through the woods, and had met a carter on the road who had passed the girl on the heath. A laborer had seen a woman climb the palings of the park, and Solomon had tramped home to his brother with the news. Isaac had sworn that Dan’s wife should be recovered, but first they had buried the treasure in a place unknown to Bess.

XL

For an hour Jeffray walked alone in the garden that morning, thinking over the future and his duty to Bess. He had sworn to his own heart that she should not fall again into her husband's hands, and yet in the making of this vow he had taken a grave step on the path of life. Jeffray was in no temper to be scared by calumny or slander. He had fought his fight and proved his power to act according to his conscience. His thoughts were not for himself that morning, but for the woman whose life was pledged to him for love.

About ten o'clock he left the garden for the library, and, opening his bureau, wrote a long letter to his attorney at Lincoln's Inn. Then he unlocked an old dower-chest that stood beside the fireplace, and lifted out the strong-box where he kept what money he required. Wilson, who was smoking at the window, watched him counting out the gold pieces and the notes upon the table. The lad was so serious and intent on it that the painter realized how grimly he was in earnest.

"Three hundred guineas, Dick—three hundred guineas. Enough powder and shot to serve for the time being."

Wilson took his pipe-stem from between his teeth.

"Plenty of hard cash, sir," he said. "What are you going to do with it? Hire some sly fox of a lawyer?"

Jeffray looked up with a frown.

"No, not that, Dick. I am preparing for what I hold to be my duty."

"Well, sir, well?"

"I am going to save this woman from the past, and act with honor for her, even though our love may come to nothing."

Wilson sat up and looked hard at Jeffray, profoundly interested in the problem-play before him.

"You can trust me, sir; what do you mean to do?"

"Make her a new life, Dick."

"Yes."

"Money is nothing to me. I can give her all of it she needs in this world, a home, and safety from all sordid care and dread."

"Well, what then?"

Jeffray leaned back against the wall, and looked out gravely through the open window.

"I have not found the end yet," he said.

Wilson nodded.

"She has trusted me; God help me to deserve her trust."

As the morning wore on, Wilson noticed that an increasing restlessness was taking possession of the rebel. He grew moody, distraught, and silent, called for wine, and wandered hesitatingly about the room. The painter began to wonder whether Jeffray's enthusiasm was abating, and whether he was tempted to regard the adventure in a more cold and calculating light. The affair reminded the painter of love as it was pictured in the old ballads. The beggar's daughter of Bethnal Green could have had no more monstrously impossible romance than this peasant girl in a Sussex forest.

Mr. Wilson's surmises, however, were utterly at fault, though logic upheld them with an obvious display of probabilities. It was his ignorance of Lot Hardacre's fate that was troubling Jeffray at the eleventh hour. No news had come from Rookhurst, and his cousin might have bled to death in the coach for all Jeffray knew to the contrary. Bess's surrender, the bustle of preparation, had carried Richard above the wreckage of the past for the morning. The memory of Lot's gray face and bloody body haunted him as the hours passed by.

The restless stirrings of compunction were not to be refused a hearing. Jeffray met his fears with the answer of action. He would ride to Rookhurst, go to Stott's house, and hear the truth from the surgeon's own lips.

"I cannot rest, Dick," he said, "until I have heard the truth about poor Lot."

Wilson suggested that he might send a servant.

"Dick," quoth the younger man, sadly, "that would be ungenerous of me. It was my sword that did the deed."

"True, sir, true."

"You will remain on guard this afternoon? Bess is in the blue parlor beyond the dining-room. You will find my pistols in the library."

Wilson smiled as though amused at the responsibility that was thrust upon him.

"I will play the Cerberus, sir," he said. "Go to Rookhurst, and may you find Mr. Hardacre alive."

Jeffray saw Bess before he left the house, and explained the nature of his purpose to her. She was a little loath for him to go, having learned to feel already a sweet and strange security in his presence. He kissed her, and smiled, not sorry in his heart that even the small leave-takings of love could bring regret into the woman's eyes. She went with him to the terrace, and parted from him with a pressure of the hand.

Jeffray recovered much of his fervor as he swung through Rodenham and on towards Rookhurst. The west wind set the woods a-whimper, the foxgloves waving above the bracken. Dog-roses were threading the hedge-rows, delicate in coloring as pink sea-shells. Honeysuckle trailed from the oak-saplings and the hazels, and the

fields were green with the rising corn. In the meadows the hay rippled, sinuous as the sea under the passing wind, and over the dense green of the summer woods sunlight and cloud shadows raced and played.

It was about four o'clock when Jeffray saw the little town of Rookhurst straggling red-roofed down the slope of a hill. A gray tower with a white-shingled spire flashed up in the sunlight above the gables, chimneys, and dormer-windows. There were orchards lying about the town, and every house seemed overrun with roses. Meadows, still golden with buttercups, and afire with sorrel and red clover, ran down to the stream that flickered on towards the sea.

Jeffray rode down King Street into the market-place, his horse's hoofs clattering on the round cobbles, quaint casements opening through clematis and roses on either hand. An Old World quiet, a calm air of contented indolence seemed to hang over the red roofs of the little town. The good people of Rookhurst took life as though it was an endless June. The quiet shops were cursed with no surfeit of customers, and the dogs slept on the sunny side of the footway. The very clock in the church-tower smote the quarters as though Time were no demon to be obeyed.

Surgeon Stott's house stood in one corner of the market-place, beyond the timbered pump-house, where a few old men were basking on the benches. The house was painted white, and had a flight of six red-brick steps leading up to the green front-door. Red-and-white chintz curtains were looped back from the windows, and the window-boxes were filled with flowers. Jeffray walked his horse round the pump-house, and saw that straw had been spread over the brown cobbles to deaden sound. He was on the point of dismounting when the green door opened, and Miss Jilian herself came down the steps, followed by a servant in the Hardacre livery.

Jeffray flushed up to the roots of his hair. The lady's eyes had swept over him, flashing and scintillating with scorn. Instinctively he had raised his hat to her, but there was no flicker of recognition on her face. Strangely enough, Jeffray's respect for Miss Hardacre deepened of a sudden. He saw her trip round the market-place in her big bonnet, the footman following her, and disappear within the doorway of the Blue Boar, Rookhurst's most aristocratic inn.

Jeffray, sensitive to Miss Hardacre's scorn, hesitated whether he should dismount and inquire at the house for Mr. Lancelot. In the height of his indecision, the green door opened again, and Surgeon Stott, in blue coat and buckskin breeches, appeared upon the steps. He bowed to Jeffray and lifted his hat. Richard wheeled his horse round close to the footway, and looked earnestly in the surgeon's face.

"Can I speak with you a moment, Stott?"

The surgeon's features relaxed into a kindly smile. He came down the six red steps, and stood on the flagged footway, his fingers playing with the gold seals that reposed upon his white waistcoat.

"How is my cousin, Stott. I have ridden over to inquire?"

The gentleman in the blue coat half closed his eyes, threw out his stomach, and cleared his throat.

“Mr. Hardacre has had a nasty mauling, sir,” he said; “but I have done the best for him.”

“Will he recover?”

Surgeon Stott glanced searchingly at Jeffray.

“The lung was touched, sir, and he was bleeding like a pig when they brought him in here yesterday. It is my opinion, however, that Mr. Hardacre’s vitality will pull him through.”

“Thank God,” said the younger man, with genuine and hearty relief.

The surgeon’s broad face beamed. He liked Jeffray, and felt that he was sincere in his spirit of regret.

“It was a narrow margin, sir,” he said, “another finger’s-breadth, and your sword would have touched the heart. Young blood, Mr. Jeffray, young blood! You gentlemen in the twenties are apt to be hot in the head, and the mischief’s sooner made than mended. I have nothing to do with the quarrel, sir, and I hope the incident will breed no ill-feeling between us.”

Jeffray held out his hand to the surgeon.

“Why should it, Stott?” he said. “I am grateful to you for saving my cousin’s life. I will not explain the nature of the quarrel; you are probably wiser than I am in some respects.”

Stott gave Jeffray a shrewd look, and grimaced expressively in the direction of the Blue Boar.

“A lady, as usual, sir,” he said, “though family differences are no business of mine. I have to mend bodies, sir, not to tinker at hearts.”

“True,” answered the younger man, thoughtfully, “and whatever you may hear said against me in the future, Stott, you may remember that I acted as my honor desired. We are not always our own masters in this world, sir; there is a thing called destiny that pushes us forward through the thorns.”

And with a last hand-shake, Jeffray clattered out of Rookhurst market-place, feeling a happier man than when he had entered it.

Clearing the streets of the little town, he saw that heavy clouds were massing in the northwestern sky. The atmosphere had been preternaturally clear, the domed foliage of the distant woods, the swell of the southern downs standing out in beautiful distinctness under the June sky. Old Gladden had been grumbling all the morning at the heat, prophesying thunder and a heavy fall of rain. As Jeffray climbed slowly up the long slope towards the forest ridge, the black outliers moving ahead of the massive wall of vapor began to stream across the sun. The whole landscape was bathed in a strange splendor of slanting sunlight, the woods and meadows lying a wondrous green under the imminent gloom of the purple north.

Jeffray pricked up his horse, and came at a fast trot into Rodenham village. Already there were vague mutterings running athwart the distant sky. Outside the Wheat Sheaf Inn Jeffray came upon some twenty troopers of a regiment of Light-Horse drinking beer at the wooden tables, their horses picketed upon the green. Some of the men were watching the thunder-clouds, reckoning on the drenching of the outer man as they were moistening the inner. Their cornet, a dark-faced youth with a hooked nose and a libidinous mouth, came to the doorway of the inn with George Gogg as Jeffray passed. The innkeeper saluted the Squire, the officer staring at him with an insolence of militant youth, as though remarking, "And who the devil may you be?" Jeffray attached no significance to the incident for the moment. He supposed that the troopers were on the march, and that the cornet had called a halt out of courtesy to the coming storm.

As Jeffray turned in under the yews at the park gate he was stopped by the lodge-keeper's wife running out in a red petticoat and a very slatternly pair of stays. The woman, who was something of a drunkard, appeared flushed and excited. She had the eager, officious look of a common creature big with information.

"Well, Mrs. Wilder, what is it?"

"My man's gone up to the house, your honor; there's been a scrimmage at the priory."

Jeffray's face hardened on the instant.

"A scrimmage! What do you mean?"

The woman appeared to swell with the satisfaction of her sensational confession. Her red and coarse-featured face shone out at Jeffray with every suggestion of ill omen.

"Mr. Gladden sent down word, sir, as how a number of rough fellows from the forest have broke in, cut the painter gentleman over the head, and trussed up the young woman as was staying with ye."

Jeffray waited to hear no more. He insulted the woman's eloquence by clapping in his spurs and leaving her standing open-mouthed and loose-bosomed in the road. It was even as the lodge-keeper's wife had told him. Jeffray entered the house to find Dick Wilson propped up on the library sofa with a bandaged and bloody head. Bess was gone.

XLI

Dan and old Isaac had been lying hid all day like a couple of leopards in one of the sloping shrubberies that closed in the garden on the west. Their patience had been rewarded, for they had seen Bess appear for that fatal moment upon the terrace when she had taken leave of Jeffray when he rode to Rookhurst. They had watched her return into the house, pass the windows of the dining-room and seat herself at the window of the blue parlor. Her own dreamy and passionate sense of security had delivered her into her husband's hands. Dan and Isaac had crept round to the eastern end of the terrace, entered with masterly boldness at the porch door, and caught Bess alone in the blue parlor. The girl had fought like a wild thing, only to be stunned by Dan in savage impatience with a blow from the hilt of his hanger. In the hall he had come face to face with Dick Wilson rushing, pistols in fists, from the library. The painter, nothing of a marksman, had fired at Isaac and missed, and taken a cut across the pate from Dan's hanger for his pains. Peter Gladden, discreetly deaf to all this pother, had only run to Mr. Wilson's help when he was assured that such dangerous ruffians as the Grimshaws had departed. Officious to the point of fanaticism when the peril was past, he had scuttled away to rouse the grooms in the stable, and had stormed and hectored when the fellows displayed no overmastering desire to give chase to the Grimshaws over Rodenham heath.

During Peter Gladden's explanations and Mr. Wilson's condemnation of his own carelessness, the thunder-storm had burst over the old house. Great lightning cracks streamed across the sky; the wind labored and gathered itself into spasmodic and mournful gusts; the tall trees battled one with another; rain rattled on the broad-leaved laurels and hollies. The very deeps of the old house seemed to quiver beneath the mighty reverberations of the heavens. Gray sheets of rain dimmed the landscape, and shrouded the struggling and wind-tossed trees.

Gladden, querulous and uneasy, moved to the library window and closed it against the rain. Jeffray was standing motionless in the centre of the room, looking at the bands of blood-blotched linen about Dick Wilson's head. He turned to the table abruptly, picked up the pistols the painter had used so clumsily, and glanced at the flints and the priming-pans. Going to an old armoire that stood in the far corner, he opened it and took out a leather belt that carried a powder-flask, a bag of bullets, and a hunting-knife. He loaded and primed the empty pistol, buckled the belt about his body, and then spoke to Gladden in a quiet and determined voice.

"Order the mare to be saddled," he said; "she will stand the thunder better than Brown Will."

Gladden stared at his master incredulously.

"Do you hear me, Gladden?"

“I do, sir.”

“Then obey my orders. Quick with you, and see that the brandy flask is filled and strapped to the saddle with the holsters.”

The butler slouched away, unbuttoning and buttoning his coat in agitation. Wilson, who was weak from loss of blood, and had been listening to Jeffray’s orders, staggered up from his chair, and faced his friend.

“Where are you going, sir?” he asked, almost roughly.

“To Pevensel, Dick.”

“To Pevensel?”

“Where else—after what has happened?”

The painter stretched out his hands as though to plant them appealingly on Jeffray’s shoulders. Richard drew two steps back from him with a slight frown.

“Are you mad, sir?—are you mad?”

“No, I am not mad, Dick.”

“They will murder you, sir. I tell you they are desperate men.”

“So am I, Dick,” said the other, simply.

Wilson beat his left fist into his right palm.

“You can’t ride out in such weather. Wait and get help; take your servants with you if you must meddle in this mad business.”

Jeffray appeared unmoved by the suggestion.

“I am taking my own life in my hands, Dick,” he said. “There is nothing else for me to do. They are desperate men, you say; I grant it you. They will murder this woman, Dick, and I, too—am desperate. The law will not help me. I tell you I am going to Pevensel to try and save her, though she be another man’s wife.”

Wilson, with a helpless gesture, sank back into his chair.

“I see that I waste my words,” he said.

“Good-bye, Dick; give me your hand.”

“God keep you, sir, from getting your brains scattered for the sake of a green petticoat.”

The sky was breaking in the west when Jeffray mounted his black mare, rode down through the park, and passed the gibbet on Rodenham heath. A splendor of rain-drenched gold streamed from under the lifting edge of the clouds. The whole landscape grew bathed in a flood of slanting light. The moorland and the green woods flashed and glittered; masses of wild tawny vapor crowned the heights of Pevensel. Rain was still falling lightly from the black clouds above, but the mutterings of the thunder and the streaks of fire were passing southward towards the sea.

Jeffray left the road below Beacon Rock and crossed the heath towards the forest. His eyes, dark and alert in his sallow face, searched the waste for signs of

life. A solitary plover flapped and wailed against the sun, but for all else the wilderness and the welkin seemed deserted. Soon Jeffray was riding down the long slope that fell away towards the purlieus of the forest. He found the path that Bess had shown him of old, and passed in under the trees.

Pevensel was a magic wilderness that evening, with the sunlight flooding through from the wet west, and every bough glistening with dew. Under the pines the damp mast shone a deep rich bronze. The scent of the rain-drenched bracken and the pines steamed up into the slanting sunlight. Jeffray had no eye for the mere beauty of it at that moment. All tangible things were without significance save when they prompted the vigilance of the senses. The trees were a dumb and unmeaning multitude, the sunlight a curse when it blurred and obscured the distance. Jeffray had no vision before him save the vision of Bess lying senseless and broken in Dan's great arms.

A confused sound of voices came suddenly to Jeffray through the forest, as he neared the broad ride known as White Hind walk. He reined in to listen, heard the gruff and angry growling of men's voices rising from the deeps below him. Pushing on cautiously he came to where the ride clove a great pathway through the forest, and, putting spurs to his mare, dashed across it at a canter. As he flashed across the open he caught a glimpse of a line of pack-horses being driven at a trot along the ride some two hundred paces towards the south. Men were cursing and belaboring the beasts with sticks, the fierce and strenuous figures looming dim and blurred under the light through the trees. The significance of the thing flashed through Jeffray's mind, as he held the mare well in hand and swung along the winding path, dodging the swooping boughs as they trailed above his head. He had seen a smuggling cavalcade threading through the forest, in some peril of capture, to judge by the way the men were beating the pack-horses. Jeffray remembered, at the same moment, the cornet and the light-horse at Rodenham village. There might be fighting afoot, and what if the Grimshaws were entangled in the scrimmage?

It was not long before the trees began to thin before him, the open west shining a wall of amber pilastered by the dark boles of the pines. Jeffray, growing cautious, dismounted and led his mare aside from the path, and tethered her in a slight hollow of the ground where she was hidden from the path by undergrowth and bracken. He took the pistols out of the holsters, reprimed them, and pushed on towards the hamlet. Looking down from the converging aisles of the forest, he saw the green break in the woods lying calm and quiet under the western sun. The place appeared deserted and silent, save for a few cows with swelling udders that were waiting at a byre-gate to be milked.

Jeffray's eyes fixed themselves upon the cottage farthest from him. The gray walls were half hidden by the apple-trees of old Isaac's orchard. The cottage was Dan Grimshaw's cottage; Bess had spoken of it to Jeffray, and he recognized it from her words. But what was more significant to him for the moment was that a man stood leaning against the rough fencing of the garden with a musket lying in the

crook of his left arm. The sunlight flashed on the long barrel, and the faint sound of the man's whistling came up to Jeffray in the woods. He felt convinced, as he scanned the hamlet, that the Grimshaws were entangled in the smuggling enterprise, that Bess was in the cottage, and that they had left one of their men on guard.

There was no time to be wasted, and Jeffray, casting a half circle round the clearing, came to the thickets to the north of the cottage. The trees grew close to the garden on the north and west. Crouching behind the bracken, Jeffray won a clear view of the man leaning against the fence. He was Enoch, Solomon Grimshaw's eldest son, a raw-boned lout, with a red beard fringing his chin. He was whistling a country song, dandling his musket lazily on his left arm, and taking his duty very stolidly.

Jeffray's wit served him at the crisis. He slipped back from the bracken, and skirted round under the trees till he came to the back of the cottage. There was no second door to it, and the narrow lattices were closed. He gained the back of the cottage, moved step by step to the angle of the wall, and peered round it with his pistols ready. An apple-tree half hid from him the man leaning against the fence. The fellow was still whistling stolidly, and seemed in no fear of a surprise.

The grass path gave Jeffray the advantage that he needed. He crept on till he reached the farther edge of the cottage, and had the broad back of Solomon's son in full view. Covering the man with one of his pistols, he stamped his foot, and kept his finger tight upon the trigger.

The man by the fence whipped round as though he had been touched on the shoulder. The levelled pistol, with the black circle of the muzzle covering him, appeared to astonish him considerably.

"Put down your musket, or I fire."

The clear, tense tones rang out like a pistol-shot. Solomon's son hesitated and obeyed.

"Hold up your hands."

A pair of dirty paws went up.

"March off ten paces."

Jeffray advanced on the fellow from the cottage. His last command was obeyed with such exaggerated nimbleness that Jeffray saw the sentinel take to his heels and scud towards the woods. He held his fire, and, reaching over the fence, possessed himself of the abandoned musket. He had hardly turned back towards the cottage when he heard the sound of shouting coming from the forest. He ran up the path and put his shoulders to the door of the cottage. It was locked and the key was gone. Clinching his teeth, he levelled the musket and blew in the lock. The door yielded to him, and he crossed the threshold.

One rapid glance showed Bess lying full length upon the oak table, bound wrist and ankle, the cords passing also about her body. The voices increased in volume rapidly. Jeffray ran to the door, and looked out. Pack-horses were being driven from

the clearing into the woods; men were rushing to and fro in the sunlight, cursing, and cutting the bales from the beasts' backs. Jeffray saw Solomon's son shouting and waving his arm in the direction of Dan's cottage. Several figures broke away from the mob of pack-horses and gathered round the man. Jeffray slammed the door to, shot the heavy bolts, snatched the wooden bar from the corner and ran it through the staples. He turned back into the room, took the knife from the sheath at his belt, and cut the cords that bound Bess.

She struggled up, flung her arms round Jeffray, and kissed him on the lips.

"They are coming," she said, hoarsely.

"Yes, yes."

"Give me the musket. I can fight."

Jeffray gave the musket into her hands, looked at his pistols, laid his sword upon the table and the belt that carried the powder-flask and bullets.

"Load it," he said, quietly; "ram home several slugs. Kneel down behind the chair."

Bess, giving him a fierce love glance, did as he commanded her.

"Watch the window; I will hold the door. Reload for me if you can. We shall have the whole smuggling crew on us in a moment."

Even as he spoke they heard the sound of men running. Heavy footsteps came up the path towards the cottage. They heard Dan's voice roaring at them, bidding them open to him, or they would break down the door.

XLII

Jeffray stood gripping his pistols in the cottage room, driven by strange stress of circumstances to fight for a peasant girl against a crowd of cursing and sweating smugglers. He had never stood forward as a hero among his peers, those blue-eyed, plump-bellied worthies who preached or swore in the pulpit and at the dining-table. Slim, sensitive, yet strong now as a band of steel, he waited, watching the door heave and creak beneath the weight of Dan's great body. Bess, kneeling behind her chair, was plying the ramrod. Her eyes met Jeffray's for a moment, the gleam in them speaking for her woman's heart.

Men were massing outside the cottage, brown handed, brown faced, redolent of liquor and of the sweat of action. Bess heard old Isaac's treble, warning the fellows to keep clear of the window, and calling for a beam to break down the door. Jeffray saw the hole that he had blown in the lock with the musket darkened by the shadow of a man's head. The glittering white of an eyeball showed through the rent. He stepped aside from the stretch of floor that the hole commanded, knowing that a pistol's snout might take the place of a man's eye. Nor was he too swift in the conclusion. There was a brisk report, a belching of smoke into the room, and a ball flattened itself against the opposite wall. Bess's eyes flashed round to see whether Jeffray were hurt or no. He shook his head at her, smiled, and pointed to the window.

A lull followed. Then there was much shouting and a stamping of feet along the pathway to the cottage. They were bringing up a wagon-pole to beat in the door, and the oaken barrier shook and quivered at the first charge. A second shout like the shout of sailors heaving at a rope, a second swing of the pole, and the door split in the centre. Jeffray levelled a pistol and fired. He saw a contorted face sink back out of sight, heard a cry of pain, and a volley of curses. Turning quietly to the table he began recharging the empty pistol. Bess was crouching behind her chair, the musket resting on the rail, its muzzle covering the window.

She gave a sudden sharp cry, and pressed her cheek close to the stock. Jeffray, who was watching her, saw her eyes gleam out, the white crook of her forefinger tightening on the trigger. An echoing roar filled the room. Smoke swirled about the beams, wreathed and drifted into the corners. Jeffray, looking towards the window, saw nothing but a shattered lattice and blue vapor curling out into the sunlight. He gazed hard at Bess as he rammed home the bullet and sprinkled the powder on the pan. She seemed unconscious for the moment of his presence, a strange smile playing about her mouth.

"Who was it?" he asked her.

She did not move or look at Jeffray.

“A man. He was pointing a pistol at you through the window.”

“Is he down?”

“I saw him fall.”

The shots from the cottage seemed to have sobered the gentry for the moment. Jeffray heard old Isaac screaming and cursing, urging on the men to break in the door. Gathering together in a bunch, they lunged at it again with the wagon-pole, the door splitting from floor to lintel and the pole starting fully three feet into the room. Jeffray had a confused vision of tanned throats and fierce faces, a brandished cutlass, an upraised arm. He fired once, saw a red blotch show on one sun-tanned cheek, and the men hesitate and edge back from the broken door. The pole sank and wedged itself between the rent planking; the shifting figures melted away towards the garden-gate.

Loud cries had risen on the outskirts of the forest.

“Look out, lads, the redcoats; gather, gather!”

There was a scattering of pistol-shots, a confused trampling of feet, the clear-ringing voice of a man shouting orders. A bullet came crashing through the cottage window to bury itself in one of the great beams of the ceiling. Frightened horses were screaming and cantering about the clearing.

Bess was standing by the table reloading the musket. Jeffray, with the empty pistol still smoking in his hand, went to the window and looked out. He saw a man crawling down the path on his hands and knees, coughing and spitting blood, his head lolling from side to side. The open space between the trees seemed a-swirl for the moment with swords and plunging horses, a tangle of redcoats and of blurred and dusky figures. The smuggling folk and the troopers were stabbing and cutting at one another amid the plunging pack-horses. From the southern end of the clearing Jeffray saw a mounted excise-officer cantering up with some twenty revenue men at his heels. They had tracked the smuggling folk up from Thorney Chapel, while the cornet of Light-Horse, led by a spy, had brought his troopers through the woods from Rodenham. Soon the struggling knot of fustian and scarlet broke and spread into scattering eddies. Figures went scudding from the woods, some dropping and grovelling before they reached the cover. The fight was over. The foresters and the smuggling folk, such as were left of them, scattered and fled for the sanctuary of the forest.

Jeffray felt that Bess was near him, and turning sharply he found her standing at his elbow.

“The revenue men,” she said, in her husky voice, putting her hands upon the sill and looking out through the broken lattice.

Jeffray, conscious of the white and desirable face that dreamed up at him out of a cloud of hair, thrilled to the wild charm of it all, the uprushing of romance into his brain.

“Bess,” he said, smiling, “what are we to do?”

She looked at him half puzzled, smiling a little for the sheer sweetness of having her head resting upon his arm.

"We are free now, are we not, Richard?"

Jeffray pursed up his mouth grimly, and pointed to the broken door.

"I have spilled blood," he said, "and kept a man from the charge of his own wife. The law takes knowledge of these things. Tell me, Bess, who was the man you fired at through the window?"

She drew closer to Jeffray as though afraid.

"I do not know," she answered.

"Was it Dan?"

"I don't know—I don't know. Take me away," and she clung to Jeffray like a frightened child.

Jeffray wrenched the two halves of the broken door apart and thrust back the wagon-pole, so that there was room for them to pass. He sheathed his sword, buckled on the belt with the powder-flask and hunting-knife, and, picking up the pistols, looked round for Bess. She had climbed the stairs, and Jeffray could hear her moving to and fro in the room above, while the clock on the kitchen mantle-shelf ticked on as though death and desire were of no account.

The redcoats were securing such prisoners as they had taken, while the revenue men gathered the pack-horses together and broke into the cottages and out-houses to ransack them to the very rafters. Jeffray watched them at work through the broken door. Soon he heard Bess descending the stairs. She had tidied her clothes and bound up her hair, and thrown an old cloak over her shoulders. He held the broken halves of the door apart from Bess, and followed her down the garden path. The dusk was fast falling, but there was enough light to show the blood-stains on the bricks. Bess shivered a little, drew up her petticoats and picked her way towards the gate. Jeffray swung it back for her, and they passed out into the open land that was still lit by the slanting sunlight.

Bess came to a dead halt suddenly some ten paces from the palings. She seized Jeffray's wrist, and stood pointing to the body of a man lying in the long grass. Her eyes had dilated, the pupils swimming black, and awed under the long lashes.

"Look!"

Jeffray went a step nearer and gazed down at the man lying in the grass. His head was twisted to one side, the upper lip drawn up over the teeth in a snarling grin. There was blood on the black beard, blood on the hairy chest and on the shirt that flapped open from the massive throat. It was Dan who lay dead with a musket-bullet through his chest.

Bess and Jeffray stood and looked into each other's eyes. Her hand still gripped his wrist spasmodically. He saw her lips move, saw the unuttered question in her eyes.

“He is dead,” he said, solemnly.

“Who, who?”

“Dan, your husband.”

She tottered and clung to him, struggling for her breath, yet still staring at the dead man in the grass. Jeffray had one arm about her body. He was as white as Bess, yet the master of his own manhood. A shout came to him across the clearing. Several red-coats were approaching the cottage, led by an officer with his sword drawn.

XLIII

Jeffray, rising above the entanglements of the moment, took Bess by the arm, and led her back through the gate towards the cottage. He spoke a few words to her, warning her to keep the manner of Dan's death secret, and to leave the unravelling of the coil to him. Bess, looking like one in pain, sank down on the rough bench beside the door. The shock of seeing her dead husband's face had unnerved her utterly for the moment.

Jeffray, turning from her with his mouth set, found that the officer and his troopers were already at the gate, their red coats shining out against the dark background of the trees. Jeffray acted on the inspiration of the moment. He walked coolly down the garden path, took off his hat to the officer, to be surprised by hearing his own name coming glibly from the soldier's lips.

"Mr. Richard Jeffray, I believe?"

The civilian bowed. He recognized the officer as the cornet of Light-Horse, whom he had seen lounging in the doorway of the Wheat Sheaf Inn at Rodenham.

"I see, sir, that I am known to you."

The cornet showed his regular white teeth in a good-humored smile, and ordered his men to stand back some paces.

"A mounted servant of yours," he said, "fell in with us as we were crossing Rodenham heath. The fellow appeared much concerned about your safety."

The cornet was studying Jeffray curiously with his large and melancholy eyes. He had the dreamy and sensuous look of a young man whose amiability made him popular with women. It was evident that he had been enlightened in some measure as to the nature of Jeffray's romantic quest, and that being something of a sensualist, he regarded the civilian with an erotic interest. Jeffray knew not for the moment whether to bless or curse Wilson and the butler for meddling in his adventures. He looked hard at the soldier as though to discover what species of man he had to deal with.

"Of one thing, sir, I am assured," he said, assuming an air of candor, "that I have to thank you for rescuing me from a very hot and dangerous corner."

The soldier bowed slightly, and smiled in his tired and melancholy fashion.

"We were ordered to assist these revenue fellows," he explained, "in rounding up one of the most savage smuggling gangs in Sussex. I can only express my satisfaction at having been able to assist a gentleman whose courage had carried him into the enemy's lines."

Such stately civility appeared to promise well for the adaptability of the cornet's sentiments. Jeffray felt by instinct that it would be expedient for him to trust the

man, pretend to make a friend of him, and thus get Bess safely out of Pevensel.

"I suspect that we can understand each other, sir," he said, with a boyish laugh, "and I hold myself fortunate in having been thrown in contact with a gentleman. If you will walk aside with me—I can explain."

The cornet stood aside from the gate, and confessed himself at Jeffray's service. He was one of those men who never quarrel by inclination, and was indeed the very creature Jeffray needed, lazy, good-tempered, eager for popularity, a man tinged with a sentimental devotion towards women, a devotion that bowed down before a dimpled chin, and capitulated smilingly to a pair of mischievous eyes.

"I am at your service, sir," he said, bowing.

Jeffray took the soldier at his word, and, with an air of unpremeditated abstraction, marched him straight for Dan Grimshaw's body. The exquisite son of Mars started at the sight of the contorted face shining a dead white from the grass. He touched the body a little contemptuously with his foot, sniffed, and shrugged his padded shoulders.

"Another poor devil shot," he said.

Jeffray bent over the body as though it were new and strange to him.

"Hit in the chest," he said, reflectively. "Your men were firing pretty briskly into the mob."

"They fired on us first, sir," quoth the cornet, as though moved to justify his orders.

"I don't doubt it. Some of your shots came into the cottage where I was cornered with the girl whose life I was trying to save."

With much parade of mystery Jeffray unfolded to the sentimental youth as much of the past as suited the occasion. He told how he had come to be blockaded in the cottage, and confessed that he had been compelled to fire on the smuggling folk in self-defence. Concerning Dan's death he was discreetly silent, nor did he divulge the fact that Bess had helped him to hold the cottage. The cornet listened with the most serious and sympathetic attention, stroking the silver facings of his coat, and never so much as dreaming to wink at Jeffray.

"I am not astonished, sir," he said, at the end thereof, "that the lady should be a little shaken after such adventures."

"Your sympathy does you credit," returned Jeffray, with a bow.

"May I ask what is to be done with the lady?"

"I desire to disentangle her from such painful surroundings, and place her under my housekeeper's care at Rodenham."

The cornet looked sadly at Jeffray, as though taking him for a very eccentric person or a most human and devoted fool. Being an amiable and sentimental creature, and not given to legal methods of reflection, he showed himself very ready to assist Jeffray with the true courtesy of a cavalier.

"Shall I lend you two troopers and a guide," he said, "to convey you to Rodenham? Is the lady fit to travel?"

Jeffray accepted the suggestion.

"I thank you for your courtesy," he said; "the ride will take the girl away from her own thoughts. I shall be very grateful to you if you will make inquiries as to her husband—Daniel Grimshaw, and the old man, Isaac. If you discover any facts bearing upon the mystery of the girl's past I shall be eager to receive them. My own mare is tethered in the woods. One of the pack-horses would carry the lady."

The soldier proved himself the very perfection of a Pandar in scarlet and silver. He would as soon have assisted in so romantic an intrigue, for such he fully believed it to be, as have perused one of the most interesting passages in the life of one of Mr. Fielding's heroes. Jeffray's mare was discovered safely hidden in the woods where he had left her. One of the pack-horses was saddled and Bess mounted thereon. Two troopers and a guide were ordered to put themselves at Jeffray's service.

"I wish you good speed, sir," said the cornet, bowing and raising his hat to Bess.

Jeffray, charmed by the young man's urbanity, shook him heartily by the hand.

"You will do me the honor of dining with me to-morrow?" he asked.

The cornet bowed, his brown eyes brightening with momentary relish.

"Certainly, if my duties permit the pleasure," he said, smiling a tired smile.

Into the sweet dusk of the wet woods rode Jeffray with Bess beside him. The western sky was still streaked with gold beyond the trees, but the woods before them were tangled deeps of mysterious gloom. All the June perfumes of the earth streamed out from the brakes and thickets, mingling with the pungent breath of the pines. Bluish vapor filled the hollows, merging into the deep purple of the forest's shadows. Here and there some rain-pool in the grass was touched with the faint light from the western sky. An infinite languor seemed to weigh upon the calm and misty trees. There was still the dull drip of the storm's dew from ten thousand branches, the rhythmic plashing of water upon the bracken and the grass.

The two red-coats and the rough laborer who acted as guide moved some twenty paces ahead of Jeffray and the girl. There was still some peril of their falling in with the folk who had been scattered from the hamlet, and the troopers kept their carbines ready. Jeffray held the bridle of Bess's horse, so that they were very close in the dusk. Bess had recovered from her faintness of an hour ago. Jeffray had given her brandy from his flask, though she had refused the bread and meat one of the soldiers had brought her from old Isaac's cottage. The day's burden of dread seemed to lift from her as they drew away from the hamlet and its memories, and sank deeper and deeper into the silence of the forest. She was near Jeffray; sometimes her knee touched his. They could almost hear each other breathing, while the sweet smell of the wet woods steamed up like incense into the night.

Jeffray appeared sunk in thought. He looked often at Bess with kindlings of

tenderness in his eyes. The pleasurableness of life seemed to steal into either heart, chastened by a melancholy born of the troubled happenings of the day. They remembered, both of them, the dead man lying in the grass. It seemed that the blood-red flower of Bess's dream had colored forth the shedding of Dan's blood.

As they crossed White Hind walk, Jeffray drew in Bess's horse very close to him, stretched out his hand and touched her arm.

"You are not unhappy, child?" he asked.

She hesitated a moment.

"No, no, not unhappy."

"You are thinking of Dan?"

"Yes."

"Why should you pity him?"

"Ah, he was pointing his pistol at you—"

"It was for my sake, Bess, I know, I know."

He looked at her thoughtfully and half sadly as though realizing how much she had dared to save his life. It was a grim thing for a woman to have blood upon her conscience, and that too—the blood of her own husband. His tenderness deepened immeasurably towards Bess. The guilt, whatever guilt there was, was his—not hers.

"There may still be danger for us," he said, gravely.

Bess looked at him as though all terror would melt away before the calm strength upon his face.

"Is Isaac alive?" she asked, putting her hair back from her forehead.

"I do not know," he answered.

"If he should guess!"

"No one shall ever know that you fired the shot that killed your husband."

Bess questioned him with her eyes.

"Should the law ever snatch at us," he continued, "I shall swear that it was I who shot Dan Grimshaw."

"You would swear that?" she asked, her whole face aglow.

"I would."

"Ah—I should love you better than to suffer that."

They rode on awhile in silence under the trees, the dark figures of the troopers moving vaguely before them, the stars above like silver bosses set in the vaultings of the forest. Often their eyes met; the girl's white face seemed to shine with an inward light through the darkness of the woods.

"Bess," said the man, at last.

She watched him—and waited.

"Let us leave this riddle to rot in Pevensel. What do I care whether you are of

the Grimshaw blood or no!”

She held out her hands to him with a great sigh.

“Take me away from it all,” she said. “I want you—and nothing more.”

A young moon was showing its silver crescent above the trees when Bess and Jeffray came out upon the heath. The two troopers and the guide were waiting for them, their figures showing dimly against the sky-line. Jeffray hailed the men, assured them that he had no further need of an escort, and, giving them a couple of guineas apiece, advised them to ride back and rejoin their troop. The fellows pocketed the money, and wished Jeffray a very good-evening. There might be spoil to be had at the hamlet in Pevensel, rooms to be rifled, hidden money to be unearthed. They turned back with the guide into the woods, leaving Bess and her man to ride on to Rodenham alone.

XLIV

Thus Bess and Jeffray rode into Rodenham together, while the scent of the wet grass floated on the warm air, and the great cedars smelled of Lebanon. The storm shower had beaten down the grass in places, so that in the dim light it seemed like the swirling eddies of a restless sea. A night-jar whirred in the beechwoods above the road. Rabbits scurried hither and thither. Jeffray could faintly see the heads of his deer rising above the bracken on the edge of the wood.

Soon the old house, black-chimneyed, a pile of shadows, with here and there a window gleaming, rose up before them out of the east. Bess drew her breath in deeply, seeing that his eyes were fixed upon the place. She was wondering whether he was sad at leaving such a home to go alone with her into strange lands.

"Of what are you thinking?" he asked her, suddenly.

"I was thinking of that," she said, pointing to the house.

"Yes."

"Can you leave it all for me?"

"Why not?" he asked, with no wavering of his words.

"It is your home."

"And will be yours."

"Ah—"

"Some day, when the clouds are gone. We are young yet; we can take our home with us in our hearts."

She looked at him very dearly, yet with some sadness in her eyes.

"I am wondering," she said.

"Yes, what are you wondering, Bess?"

"Whether I can make you happy, I who am so poor and ignorant."

"I have no doubts," he said, "no doubts whatsoever."

As they rode up to the terrace with the gardens and shrubberies dim and full of perfume under the night sky, Dick Wilson and Gladden came out from the porch. Wilson gave Jeffray a hearty hail, running forward with out-stretched hand, his eyes twinkling below the bandages that swathed his head.

"Egad, sir," he said, "I am glad to see you alive. The wilful man has won his way."

Jeffray had dismounted, but Bess was still on her horse looking down half shyly, half haughtily at the painter, as though mistrusting the good-will of her lover's friend. Wilson, who had the instinct of chivalry quick and warm under his ugly

exterior, went to her with a twinkle in his eyes, and, bowing in the most impressive fashion, took her hand and kissed it.

"May I ask your pardon, madam," he said, quaintly, "for having proved such a dunderhead of a fellow this afternoon?"

Bess eyed him questioningly.

"You have been wounded?" she asked.

"A slight cut, a slight cut across the pate with a hanger. I am a clumsy fool at my weapons. May I have the honor of helping you to dismount?"

Bess was down beside him before the words were half passed his lips. She stood at her full height before the painter, the light from one of the windows falling on her face. Wilson understood of a sudden how this tall, proud-faced forest child had set Jeffray's manhood in a blaze.

Jeffray, who had been speaking to Gladden, came back and laid his hand on Wilson's shoulder.

"This is Mrs. Elizabeth Grimshaw, Dick," he said, with the pride of a lover; "you have been paying your respects to her."

"I have, sir, I have," quoth the painter with a bow.

Bess, who had taken a liking to this ugly but honest-eyed man, smiled at him, and held out a hand.

"I thank you for having helped us," she said.

"Don't thank me, madam," retorted the painter, bluntly. "Mr. Richard here is quite capable of fighting his own battles."

They laughed—the three of them, Bess and Jeffray looking into each other's eyes. Wilson still studying with inevitable admiration the face and figure of the woman who had changed a dreamer into a man of fire and action. Peter Gladden was waiting at the hall-door, smirking, and rubbing his smooth chin with his fingers. Jeffray, giving his hand to Bess, led her with an Old-World courtliness up the steps and into the house. The butler stood aside, bowing and fixing his eyes deferentially upon his master's shoes. He cast a peering, birdlike glance at Bess after she had passed, grinned as he caught Mr. Wilson's eye, and smothered the smirk instantly as the painter's stare snubbed him. Jeffray led Bess to the dining-room where supper had been spread hastily upon the table. He drew back a chair for her, dismissed Gladden, who came in with a mincing shuffle, and prepared to wait on Bess in person.

"You must eat," he said, bending slightly over her chair.

She lay back and looked at him, her eyes shining through her half-closed lashes.

"I am not hungry."

"No, but you must keep up your strength. I will carve you some venison, and here is good red wine. I shall stand behind your chair till I am satisfied with you. And then—"

“And then?” she said, smiling with her eyes.

“I shall send you above to bed. The coach will be ready for us at seven. Come now, you must humor me; I have the guarding of your health.”

An hour later Bess was lying under the crimson canopy in the great bed above, her limbs between the white sheets, her black hair in a love tangle on the pillow. Jeffray had called Gladden to him in the dining-room, and given him his orders. Poor Gladden imagined that the family dignity must be sinking very deep into the mire. He met the amazing foolhardiness of it all with melancholy stoicism, finished the contents of a half-emptied wine-bottle when his master had gone, and confessed to himself that time and women can wreck empires.

Jeffray found Dick Wilson in the library, lighting his pipe at one of the candles, sucking in his cheeks, and looking as solemn over the ceremony as though the truth of immortality hung upon the proper kindling of the weed. He cocked one eye at Jeffray, smiled, and set himself with his back to the mantle-shelf, one white cotton stocking in wrinkles half way down his leg, his waistcoat fastened by two solitary buttons, the folds of the bandage slipping over his left eyebrow. He puffed away at his pipe, while Jeffray turned to the bureau, unlocked it, and took out the letters he had written the previous morning.

“You will see these delivered, Dick,” he said, “after I am gone?”

Wilson looked at his friend keenly.

“So you are going, sir?” he said.

“Yes, I have ordered the coach at seven. We have no time to be married in England.”

Wilson screwed up his lips and blew forth an expressive stream of smoke.

“What, you are going to be married!”

“Yes. The girl’s husband is dead.”

“The devil he is!”

“There has been a tussle between Garston’s smugglers and the King’s men; the fellow Grimshaw was shot in the scrimmage.”

A look of most unchristian satisfaction spread itself over the painter’s face. He stepped forward and held out his hand.

“I congratulate you, sir—I congratulate you.”

“Thanks, Dick.”

“The stumbling-block is removed out of the path of propriety. And why, if I may ask you, must you be in such an infatuated hurry to be gone?”

“There are reasons, Dick, that I cannot divulge to you.”

“Snub me, sir, snub me if I seem too forward. You can come by a license in a few days; there must be some obliging surrogate in the neighborhood. At the worst you can travel up to London, march to Doctors’ Commons, and secure a proper

passport to the seventh heaven."

Jeffray, pacing to and fro with his shoulders squared and the heels of his shoes coming down squarely on the polished floor, shook his head, and refused the suggestion.

"I have my reasons, Dick," he said, "and I have thought the whole thing through for myself. Some years ago old Sugg could have married us here in my own house, and for my sake I should like to see Lord Hardwicke and his grandmotherly legislation damned. I want to get the girl away from all the pother that will be brewing, to save her from the tongues of our most Christian friends. To-morrow we drive to Lewes; the next day to the sea."

Wilson rammed down the tobacco in his pipe with the end of his little finger, relit it at the candle, and puffed on reflectively.

"Well, sir," he said, "I should like to know how you rescued the lady."

And Jeffray told him, all save the way in which Dan Grimshaw met his death.

It was well after midnight when Peter Gladden lighted Jeffray to his room. Portmanteaus and valises were scattered about, some half filled, others yawning for the white linen, breeches, silk stockings, and clothes that covered the floor in confusion. Jeffray insisted on Gladden completing the packing before he went to bed. He had already discovered a polite and voiceless antagonism in the old man's manner, as though Gladden persisted in believing that the romance was but the madness of an hour. He helped the butler to fill and strap the valises, and then dismissed him, ordering him to wake him at five.

The candles were still burning in the library when the dawn came creeping into the east. Wilson, rubbing his eyes as he woke from a short sleep, heard the rumbling of wheels as the great coach was drawn out of the coach-house into the stable-yard. There was the jingling of harness being cleaned, the sound of rough voices gossiping together, an occasional coarse laugh bursting out upon the misty air. The grooms were discussing their master's love affair. Wilson yawned and stretched his limbs, climbed up out of his chair, snuffed the candles, and went out into the hall.

He met Jeffray coming down the oak stairs, a cloak over one arm, his sword under the other. As the men shook hands there was the sound of a door opening in the gallery above. Light footsteps came down the stairway; Bess, with her gray cloak over her shoulders, descended slowly towards the hall. She looked fresh and pure after her night's rest, her eyes soft and dewy, her red lips parted in a smile. Jeffray waited for her at the foot of the stairs. He took her hand and kissed it, and led her into the dining-room, looking into her eyes.

"You are rested?" he asked her, with a pressure of the hand.

"Yes—quite."

"We shall start in an hour or two. We have much to do at Lewes."

Bess looked at her clothes, her short skirt and green petticoat, and then glanced at Jeffray.

“I have thought of all that,” he said, smiling.

“Ah—”

“You shall look as fine a lady as any in Sussex. Silks and brocades, Bess, you shall have them all.”

In the midst of all the bustle of preparation, a trooper of the Light-Horse Regiment came cantering through the park with a letter for Richard Jeffray tucked under his white belt. Wilson saw the speck of scarlet from the terrace, and, walking down the drive, met the man as he reined up before the iron gates closing the garden. The trooper produced his letter and explained that he had been told, to deliver it into Mr. Jeffray’s hands. Jeffray himself appeared on the terrace at the same moment, and the painter, beckoning to him, turned back with the soldier.

“A letter for you, sir,” he said, as Jeffray came up to them.

The trooper saluted, and delivered the despatch. Jeffray ordered him to ride round to the stable and have his horse watered, and rubbed down with straw.

“From your cornet, I presume?” he asked.

The man nodded and rode on in the direction of the stables.

Jeffray and the painter went back to the terrace and leaned against the balustrade. There was an anxious frown on Jeffray’s face as he broke the seal, and spread the letter on the stone coping before him. He ran his eyes over the straggling and ill-formed sentences, his face clearing as he neared the end.

> “SIR,—Having promised to obtain for you any information bearing upon Mrs. Elizabeth Grimshaw’s past, I send you a rough copy of an extraordinary confession made to me by an old woman we found tied to a chair in one of the cottages. I cannot promise you how much truth there is in her tale, but on searching the place called the Monk’s Grave, we discovered that the turf some twenty paces from the old tree that grows on the mound there, had been trampled down quite recently. On digging we found the earth very loose, as though it had been lately turned, also a ragged piece of sail cloth, but no treasure. It is probable that the money has been taken up and hidden elsewhere, and the suspicion is strengthened by the fact that the old man, Isaac Grimshaw, is still at large. The man whom we found dead in the grass has been sworn to as Mrs. Elizabeth Grimshaw’s husband.
>
> “I trust that these facts will be of interest to you.
>
> “Unfortunately my duties here prevent me from dining with you to-day. I take the liberty of postponing the pleasure till to-morrow.
>
> “JAMES JELLICOE,
> “Cornet in his Majesty’s—Regiment of Horse.”

Enclosed within the letter, Jeffray found a page torn from a pocket-book, and

covered with the cornet's boyish writing. He held it towards Wilson, and they spelled it out together, experiencing some difficulty in deciphering the sentences that seemed to have been written in the dusk.

> Statement made by Mrs. Ursula Grimshaw this 1st day of July, 17—:
>
> "I am Isaac Grimshaw's sister. The girl Bess, my nephew's wife, is not of our blood. Twenty years ago come Michaelmas, four sailor men came into the forest with a treasure chest, arms, and a young child. They lodged in my brother Isaac's cottage, and he and they talked much together. The chest contained much money and precious things. My brother Isaac and his son John, who has been dead these fifteen years, murdered these four sailors when they were drunk, and buried their bodies in the forest. We kept the child as one of us, and called her Bess, and hid the treasure in the woods.
>
> "My brother Isaac told me that the four sailors had murdered the captain and crew of their ship, also a King's officer and his wife who were passengers. Bess, who was the lady's child, they saved out of pity, and because she was scarcely three years old. The ship, whose name I never knew, was scuttled in a fog off Beachy Head, the four sailor men coming ashore in the jolly-boat with the treasure and the child. The chest was buried in the forest near a place known as the Monk's Grave. This, God help me! is all I know. I have kept this secret twenty years."

Jeffray and the painter looked hard into each other's eyes when they had read the confession through. There was a slight flush as of triumph on Jeffray's face, as he held out his hand exultantly to Wilson.

"We go to Lewes after all," he said.

"Sir!"

"I shall send a letter back by the trooper to Cornet Jellicoe, thanking him, and saying that I have gone to Lewes on legal business. We will cross the water to-morrow, God helping us!"

Wilson gave his friend a keen look, and tapped the letter with his finger.

"There is still a mystery here, sir," he said.

"What does it matter, Dick—what does it matter?"

"If this be true—"

"True! Why, damn it, Dick, I have always believed it true. Do you think that girl was born in a hovel?"

XLV

The turret clock was striking seven when the coach swung out of the stable-yard, and, turning on the gravel-drive before the house, drew up with rattling harness before the porch. The luggage lay piled upon the roof, a loaded blunderbuss hanging in the straps before the back seat. Both the coachman and the serving-man beside him were armed. Peter Gladden, cloaked, and with a couple of pistols swinging in his tail-pockets, stood with his hand on the handle of the door.

Jeffray, his sword under his left arm, handed Bess down the steps to the coach. Dick Wilson followed them, striving not to look lugubrious, his blue eyes set staringly in his sun-tanned face. Bess tripped into the coach; Jeffray halted with one foot on the step, and held out his hand to his friend with a smile.

"Good-bye, Dick," he said, "and God bless you."

Wilson's powerful fist closed upon Jeffray's brown and sinewy fingers.

"God go with you, too, sir," he retorted, a little thickly. "I'll see to your business. The fellow in Lincoln's Inn shall have your letter, and we'll forward all news between us to France."

Jeffray gave a last grip to the painter's hand, and sprang into the coach.

"There is the letter to my bankers, Dick," he said, when Gladden had closed the door, "deliver it in person. A portion of it concerns yourself."

"Concerns me, sir?"

"Yes, Dick—good-bye—good-bye."

"God go with you both, sir, and may you be happy!"

Peter Gladden climbed to the back seat. The whip cracked, the horses strained at the traces, the heavy wheels ground into the gravel. The great coach rolled away on its high springs, leaving the old house bowered up amid its trees, moated by shrubs and the thousand faces of its flowers. Dick Wilson ran to the end of the terrace, flapping a red-cotton handkerchief. Jeffray, leaning out of the window, waved to him in turn, Bess looking over her lover's shoulder. Wilson was still standing there when a cedar hid the gardens and terrace-way from sight. Gable and chimney-stack and lozenged-casement sank away behind the trees; only a faint trail of blue smoke in the heavens showed where the old house stood.

Jeffray, with a melancholy light in his brown eyes for the moment, sighed and turned back towards Bess. She was leaning forward slightly, her elbows resting on her knees, her head thrown back, her white throat showing. She seemed oblivious for the moment of Jeffray's presence.

"Bess."

She dropped her hands with a start, and lay back in the coach, looking at him very dearly.

"Well, we are on the road," said the man, smiling.

Her lips quivered, her eyes flashed up to his.

"To-night we shall be at Lewes."

"Yes."

"And to-morrow we shall see the sea."

Bess stretched out her hand to him. Jeffray took it and held it in his, feeling it warm and dewy, full of the swift moving blood of youth.

"Ursula has confessed," he said, looking in her eyes.

"Ursula?"

"Yes—"

"Is it of Dan?"

Jeffray's calm face reassured her as she leaned towards him with sudden dread.

"No," he said, "I had a letter from the King's officer an hour ago; they had found Ursula tied to a chair in her cottage, and hearing that Dan was dead—and her kinsfolk scattered, she made a confession about the past. You are no Grimshaw, Bess, but some one's child from over the sea."

Jeffray told her all that had been laid bare in the old woman's confession, Bess lying back in the corner of the coach, her eyes looking out at the country that was sweeping by. Her fingers crept round Jeffray's wrist, and contracted spasmodically as though she wished to realize that he was near. The wild and fantastic tale unfolded itself before her, the great ship sunk at sea, the murder of the four sailors in the forest, the hiding of the treasure, the beginning of her own life in Pevensel. She began to understand much that had puzzled her of old, why Isaac had been mad for her to marry Dan, and why the old man had wished to kill her after she had watched them uncovering the chest by the Monk's Grave.

"Richard," she said, very softly, still looking out of the window.

He bent towards her with great tenderness.

"Who was my mother?"

"Bess, I do not know."

"Did they kill her?"

This time Jeffray's hand fastened upon the girl's.

"I fear so," he said, gravely.

"She was a lady?"

"Yes, so Ursula believed. It was your mother who wore the brooch your husband gave you. We may learn more of the past if the treasure is discovered."

There was silence between them for a moment. Bess was breathing deeply, her

face shining white under her black hair as she suffered the revelation to sink slowly into her soul. Jeffray, still holding her hand, watched her with a great light in his dark eyes. It was his life's desire to save this woman whom he loved from further pain and tribulation.

Bess turned to him suddenly, her face flushing, her eyes searching his.

"Ah—then you will not marry a beggar-woman," she said.

"No, no!"

"Perhaps I have that in me that can make you happy."

"Need you ask that?"

"You are giving me everything. And I?"

"You—are everything, Bess," he answered.

So the coach swung along on the road to Lewes, the wheels grinding cheerily over the stones, and Peter Gladden on the back seat solacing himself surreptitiously with a bottle of wine that he had hidden under his cloak. Bess and Richard turned their faces towards the green slopes of Pevensel, and took a long look at the forest that still spoke to them of mystery. The wild woodland sank back against the northern sky, melting into a purple mist against the blue. On the right, a good mile from the high-road, stood Thorney Chapel where Bess and Dan Grimshaw had been married. They could not see the place from the road, for it lay in the valley that ran northward to Pevensel and the vale of yews. Hidden though it was, the bleak stone chapel, with its rusty bell and rotten porch, rose vividly before the thoughts of both. They drew closer to each other in the coach, smiling half sadly into each other's eyes, remembering all that they had suffered.

The morning sped for them swiftly, like a river running under a rainless sky. The beauty of the earth seemed to grow more strange and alluring to their eyes. The great downs were rising and rising, green, gracious, and magnificent towards the south, speaking of the blue sea and the white cliffs that front the foam. The road ran now through fields and meadows, with here and there a wood filling a shady bottom, or topping the crest of a low hill. The crops in the fields rippled and glistened in the sunlight. The cows browsing in the meadows stopped to stare at the coach with liquid, violet eyes. Now and again a church-spire cleft the blue, and flashed white under the sun. From the hamlets along the road the sturdy Saxonlings, with their fair skins and tawny hair, would run out to cheer, and cling to the great springs behind, to be warned off by Mr. Gladden with imperious and unpardoning scorn.

Now, Peter Gladden was a Lewes man, and having received confidential instructions from his master, he took charge of the coach when it had once entered the town. They rumbled along the quaint old streets, with the gray castle towering above the chimney-stacks and gables, the great, green downs bulwarking the place like giant ramparts. Smoke hung in a blue haze over the town, the sun warming the tiled roofs and the red walls, flashing on the plastered gables, glimmering upon the

casements. Lewes, buxom and stirring in those Georgian days, still carried in its Old World heart the memories of great happenings in the past. Spears and surcoats no longer bristled and blazed on bluff Mount Harry. Mighty St. Pancras and his Climiacs watched no more over the souls of Gundrada and her husband. The days of kingliness, tyranny, and flaming martyrdom were passed. Soon Tom the Exciseman would be holding forth on the noble rights of scavengers and cooks.

The Rodenham coach rolled up the High Street, dropping a serving-man at the Star on the way, and turned into a little side street towards the western end of the town not far from the old castle. Peter Gladden sprang down and appeared at the window. Across the narrow pavement at the corner of the street the round, white-framed windows of a sedate little shop, where coy hats and alluring scarfs showed through the panes of glass. A brown front-door carried a modest brass plate with "Madame Michael, Milliner," inscribed thereon. Gladden, standing hat in hand, assured his master as to the excellence of the establishment.

Jeffray could see a couple of girls peering down at the coach from an open window above. He stepped out of the coach and gave his hand to Bess. Opening the door and setting a bell tinkling as in maidenly trepidation, he found himself in a little room with the wood-work painted white, a pier-glass in one corner, hats and caps ranged round on brass stands, and shelves filled with rolls of gay stuffs, cotton, satin, silk, and rich brocade. A demure, yellow-faced woman in a black sack, and wearing a white cap over her beautifully ordered gray ringlets, came forward from an inner room, courtesied, and gazed with polite curiosity at Jeffray and at Bess.

"Good-day, madame," said the man, blushing, yet cherishing his dignity.

The little French lady smiled sympathetically, her bright eyes darting comprehensive glances at Bess's rough clothes and Jeffray's grave and boyish face.

"What can I do for you, sir?" she asked, with quaint and courtly composure.

Jeffray, still red, and looking a little amused at his own novel responsibility, explained to madame how greatly they needed her help. It was no question of money; Jeffray desired to see the lady who was to be his wife dressed as charmingly as time and madame's genius could contrive. Bess was standing in the middle of the room, looking very tall and stately despite her rough clothes and red stockings and her heavy shoes. She eyed the Frenchwoman a little haughtily, glanced at herself in the pier-glass, put back the stray strands of black hair over her ears, and smiled as her eyes met Jeffray's.

"I am afraid we are taxing your ingenuity, madame," he said, to the aristocratic little lady, with a grave smile.

The Frenchwoman, with her gray ringlets, gave a merry and meaning laugh, glided up to Bess, took off the gray cloak, her deft hands fluttering white and delicate about the girl's body.

"Ah, no, a pleasure, monsieur. A Frenchwoman is never taken by surprise. Come. It can be done, ma foi, yes—it is easy, very easy."

The pretty hats were whisked down from their brass pedestals by the little lady, and poised in succession upon Bess's stately head. Strings, black, blue, and white, were tied deliciously under the round and pearly chin. Madame stood aside from time to time, striking little attitudes, glancing at Jeffray and clapping her hands.

"Ha, charming, is it not, monsieur? Look in the glass, mademoiselle; see, is it not beautiful? It is the face, the handsome face. Ah, that is quite ravishing. Does not monsieur like it?"

Yes, Jeffray admired the first, the second, the third, and so forth. He would have them all; yes, madame might set them aside as sold. Gowns and petticoats? Madame had a number ready. Of course, that was woman's business. Would mademoiselle step into the back room? The gentleman would wait, yes, he could not enter such a sanctuary, and the little Frenchwoman rippled with smiles. The lady should come forth and show herself in the dresses. She would look ravishing; yes, monsieur should not be disappointed.

Perhaps an hour passed, Jeffray scrutinizing Madame Michael's merchandise with the prejudiced eye of a man in love. These pretty stuffs had no significance beyond Bess's beauty. They were interesting by reason of the honor they might receive in being suffered to clothe the body of the one woman in Christendom. A crowd of small boys and two or three busybodies had gathered round the coach, gaping at Peter Gladden, who remained at his post, chin in air, like a Roman sentinel whom nothing could disturb. Madame Michael's girl-apprentices were giggling and chattering in the room above. Jeffray went to the semicircular window and looked out. He could see across High Street, down a narrow alley a distant view of glimmering green downs and blue-throated corn-fields ablaze with poppies.

There was the sound of a door opening, a rustle of silks. Jeffray, turning with a quick smile, saw Bess standing in the middle of the room, wearing a summer gown cut low at the bosom, and made of some gauzy blue stuff dusted with green trefoils. A white satin petticoat showed below it, looped with blue silk. She had a band of black velvet about her throat, black mittens reaching nearly to her bare elbows, and one of Madame Michael's adorable hats upon her head. Madame had even rearranged Bess's hair, the black and gleaming splendor of it contrasting with the brown and pearly neck. Bess stood looking at her lover, blushing very deeply, her eyes fixed questioningly on his. As for Jeffray, he looked at her, and could not look enough, so stately and adorable did she appear in all these pretty trappings. The wild, sleek beauty of Pevensel seemed to glorify these fine clothes in a way that would have set many a round-backed and short-legged countess weeping.

The little Frenchwoman glided forward and clapped her hands. She had been watching the pair with her black, twinkling eyes, and enjoying the charm of it with sympathetic vivacity.

"Monsieur is pleased? Yes, to be sure, never have I had such a figure to show my gowns off. It is superb, superb. This gown, sir, and the others—were made but two weeks ago for a fine lady who disappointed me at the eleventh hour.

Mademoiselle has a finer figure; they suit her to perfection."

Jeffray and Bess were smiling at each other, the girl's face radiant and suffused with a tender happiness. Nothing is more sweet to a woman than to be admired by the eyes of the man she loves.

"It is perfection," said Jeffray, gravely.

"Ah, monsieur, you are very good. And these hats, and the other gowns that madam has chosen, where may I send them? There is some work for the needle. The evening shall see them finished."

Jeffray gave the address of the Star Inn in High Street, took out his purse, and desired madame to present her bill. It proved a long one, and took several notes. But what of that? Jeffray was as glad to give as the little French lady was glad to receive. She courtesied Bess and Jeffray to her door, giving them all manner of good-wishes, and promising to send the gowns and hats to the Star before dusk. Peter Gladden's face was a unique study when he set eyes on Bess in all her splendor. He bowed low as he opened the door of the coach, and received Jeffray's orders to drive to the best goldsmith's in the town.

Thus Bess and her lover travelled from shop to shop. An enamelled watch, bracelets, rings, a gold chain, pins, and brooches were taken from the goldsmith's treasury. Shoes of fine leather and of satin were forthcoming elsewhere. Trunks were purchased at a saddler's near the castle-gate. Then came more delicate and mysterious matters. Jeffray thrust his purse into Bess's hand, and remained in the coach while she went a little shyly into Mr. Wace's mercery and linen shop. The secrets of silken hose and of chemisettes and such gear were beyond the prerogatives of man. Bess was blushing very prettily when Peter Gladden and Mr. Wace attended her back across the pavement to the coach. Jeffray gave her his hand. She looked in his eyes, reddened, and laughed alluringly.

The coach rolled along the High Street and stopped before the Star Inn, glimpses of down country striking in between the red-roofed houses. Peter Gladden had taken care to have his master's advent properly prepared for. The landlord came out in person to do the honor of his house. He bowed, rubbed his hands together, set himself and his whole establishment at Jeffray's service. A private parlor had been set apart for him. Madam was to occupy the best bedroom, and the chief chambermaid should wait on her. Yes. The gentleman desired to take passage from Newhaven on the morrow? Many travellers honored the Star at Lewes on their way to France, and the landlord made it his business to obtain trustworthy news as to the shipping. The weather was perfect, and a brig was sailing for France the very next day. There would be no difficulty about a passage.

Bess and Jeffray supped together in their private parlor whose windows overlooked the place where the Sussex martyrs had been burned of yore. Red damask curtains toned well with the black wood-work and the quaint old furniture that had ministered to many. The sunlight came slanting in, burning above the western downs, warming the red roofs and the timbered gables of the old town.

Time seemed to step to a slow and stately measure. Bells rang mellowly, the church clocks smote the hours. From the narrow streets and passageways the murmur of voices, the rumbling of wheels, rose up not unmelodiously into the evening air.

Peter Gladden waited at supper behind his master's chair. The old man's eyes wandered wonderingly towards Bess as she sat at the table in all the charm of her rich reprieve. The girl looked very lovely in her gay gown, with the black ribbon about her throat and a red rose thrust into the sable wreathings of her hair. She and Jeffray spoke but little, for Gladden's presence set a restraint upon their tongues. Bess drank a glass of red wine, when Jeffray, smiling, gave her a love toast. They were happy in the quiet passing of the hour, happy in the thoughts of what had passed and what was yet to come.

Jeffray accompanied Bess to the door of her bed-chamber that night, carrying her candle. He stood a moment in the dusk of the beamed passage, looking in her eyes as he bade her good-night.

"Sleep well," he said, touching her hand.

"Ah—you have been so good to me."

"No, no, it is my happiness. To-morrow we shall cross the sea."

She reddened, and turned up her face adorably as though for a kiss. Jeffray saw the chambermaid moving about the room, setting Bess's new clothes and trunks in order. He bent and touched Bess's hand with his lips, thinking of the mysterious days that were to come.

"God bless you, dear," he said.

Her eyes flashed out to him. She took the candle, smiled, and entered the room.

Thus, while Bess put off her clothes amid the stately strangeness of the old inn, and suffered the chamber-woman to bind her hair, Jeffray sat at the parlor window and watched the young moon sink over the roofs and chimney-stacks of the old town. The charm of the day's beauty stirred about him like the scent of flowers stealing up into the night. Bess would be sleeping her pure sleep for him, to rise and return, radiant and desirable with the dawn. Soon she would be his wife. The very thought of it stirred in him a strange and mysterious feeling of awe.

The candles were quenched in Bess's room; her gay clothes were laid out ready for the morrow. Jeffray rose at last from the window-seat, rang the bell for Gladden, and ordered him to have candles carried to his room. Down in the street an old man with flapping brim of his hat turned down over his face, had been loitering to and fro under the shadows of the houses. He limped away as the church clocks struck ten, turned into the opening of a narrow alley, and entered the doorway of a low tavern. Isaac Grimshaw was in Lewes. His son was dead, his brother Solomon taken, the secret of the treasure betrayed by Bess. He had seen the girl drive with Jeffray through the town, had watched her enter several of the shops, and lodge at the Star Inn with her lover. Isaac had talked to one of the stable-men in the yard. He had heard that the coach was ordered for the morning, and that Jeffray and Bess

were bound for Newhaven to take passage for France.

XLVI

It was early next morning when they left the town of Lewes behind upon its hill, and took the road winding across the flats towards the sea. The clouds were heavy over the downs that day, checkering the slopes with sunlight and with shadow. The Ouse burnished the broad pastures where the cattle browsed; and the green corn, dusted with scarlet poppies, waved and rippled in the freshening wind.

What zest had there been in the day for Bess since she had first wakened in the great bed to hear the clocks of Lewes striking, and the chatterings of the starlings on the tiles! The strange stir of the town, the piled-up roofs and white-faced gables, the breadth and beauty of the room she woke in charmed all her senses. She had put on those gay clothes thrice dear to her woman's heart by reason of their love-given sanctity. The picture the mirror had made of her had made her smile and blush at her own image. And Jeffray's eyes had proved more eloquent than any mirror. Then had come much running to and fro of servants, stir and bustle as the coach rattled out into the streets. The joyous reality of it all had included even the valedictory radiance of the landlord's face, the barking of the dogs, the shouting of the urchins who had capered and turned somersaults for pence. It had been life at last for her, life, generous, bubbling to the brim.

So thickly had new impressions been thrust upon Bess that she lay back in the corner of the coach, and let her heart realize its dreams. Jeffray, who was watching her, saw that her silence betrayed no sadness. He was half sunk in a reverie himself, with the jingling of the harness and the thunder of the wheels. He watched Bess, and let the past drift before his eyes, and set its seal upon the glamour of the present.

They left Kingston village in a whirl of dust. Soon Iford was past, and the stunted spire of Rodmell showed white amid the trees. They went through the village at a brisk trot, under dusty elms and glittering poplars, with the sun-tanned Sussex women staring at them from doorways. A number of children were playing before the inn where roses climbed over the trellises. The youngsters ran beside the coach, cheering and waving their hands. Bess leaned forward and waved to them in turn, her eyes full of laughing light as she threw the children pence and watched them scramble. Everything was instinct with life for her that day, and her heart went out in blitheness to the world.

They were about a mile from Rodmell, with the road running through lonely marsh-lands and diked meadows, when the Pevensel folk made a last snatch at the thread of Bess's fate. A rough shed stood at the edge of the field with a brick bridge before it closed by a gate. There was no one in sight upon the road, and nothing moved athwart the green background of the landscape, save the cattle browsing in the meadows.

The coach was within ten lengths of the cow-shed when two men came running out with a glinting of pistol-barrels in the sunlight. The younger of the two set himself in the middle of the road, and waved his arm to signal the coach to stop. It was then that Peter Gladden did one of the few bold things of his life, more from sudden impulse perhaps than from any superabundance of courage. Picking up the blunderbuss, he leaned forward over the baggage on the roof, and, chancing the singeing of his companion's wigs, let fly straight at the man in the road.

The roar of the bell-mouthed old musket set the horses plunging into a gallop. Gladden had winged his man, for the fellow had been badly hit in the thighs and body by the leaden slugs with which the blunderbuss had been loaded. He fell heavily, and tried to crawl across the road to escape the coach that was thundering down upon him.

Gladden's shot from the top of the coach was the first hint that Jeffray had of the adventure. He felt the coach sway and creak as the horses broke into a gallop, and heard the shouting of the servants. Instinctively he caught at Bess, and drew her down as a face flashed up at the window, a white, withered face, with snarling teeth and silvery hair blown by the wind. There was the crack of a pistol, and the splintering of a bullet through the off panel of the coach.

Jeffray, with eyes ablaze, snatched up one of his own "flintlocks," leaned out of the window, and fired at Isaac, who was running along behind the coach and pulling a second pistol from his belt. At the moment that Jeffray fired, the fore wheel smashed the man's legs who was lying wounded in the road. The fellow's yell of anguish spoiled Jeffray's aim. The bullet tore a shred of cloth from the shoulder of Isaac's coat, but did not stop the old wolf's rush.

Gladden was crouching on the roof, shouting to the coachman to give the horses the whip. He hurled the empty blunderbuss at Isaac as the old man made a clutch at one of the springs and missed. The musket fell at Grimshaw's feet and tripped him up as cleanly as a Bow Street runner's foot. His pistol flashed in the fall, the bullet sighing sadly over the fields. By the time Isaac had picked himself up, and stood clashing his teeth like a balked beast, the coach was fifty yards away, and going at a gallop towards the sea.

Jeffray had turned from the window, and seized Bess's arm.

"Are you hurt?"

She pointed to her breast, and he saw how near the shot had passed to her. Her gown was rent just over the heart, and the pistol wad still smoked on the lace she wore.

"Was it Isaac?" she asked.

"Yes, curse him."

"I thought I had my death, Richard—"

"He would have hit you if I had not pulled you down to me. Look, the shot has singed the shoulder of my coat."

He laughed, as a man laughs at times when he has been near death, snatched the smoking wad from the lace at Bess's bosom, and tossed it through the window.

"Isaac shall have no second chance," he said; "thank God, dear, he did not spoil it all."

And they held each other very close awhile, awed and silenced by what had happened.

By the hovel, Isaac was bending over the young man Enoch, who was groaning and writhing in the road. The slugs from the blunderbuss had fleshed him cruelly, but his broken legs hurt him more than Gladden's lead. Isaac Grimshaw's eyes showed no pity for the lad; his helpless whimperings made the old man savage.

"Drop that snivelling! Curse your bones and the mother that made 'em. What did I say to ye, 'Get to the horses' heads,' wasn't it? Not, 'Stand off and shove your arm up like a scarecrow in the middle of a field.' Pretty mess you've made. Stop that row, or I'll give ye the pistol butt."

Enoch was half fainting and too distraught with pain to give much heed to Isaac's curses. The old man took him by the collar of the coat, and dragged him into the hovel, despite his cries as the broken bones jarred and rubbed together. The lower end of one splintered shin-bone had pierced the skin and showed through the lad's stocking when Isaac let him rest at last on the foul straw of the shed.

"Lie there and snivel, damn you," he said. "The louder you shout, the sooner you'll be hanged."

And after reloading his pistols he crammed his hat down over his eyes, took his holly staff, and, ignoring Enoch's whimperings, limped away doggedly along the road to the sea.

XLVII

The sky grew more heavily clouded as Bess and Jeffray neared the sea, and the distant downs stood out with peculiar distinctness under the ragged fringes of the wind-blown clouds. The two in the coach hardly so much as heeded the darkening of the day, or the dishevelled clouds that were shutting out the sun. They were still blessed by the preservation of the morning, and by the thought that the sea would rock their troubles to an end. The coach rolled fast over the flats, dust blowing in clouds, and the windows rattling and banging with the wind. Jeffray had shouted to the coachman not to spare his horseflesh, for there was no knowing how far old Grimshaw's doggedness might not take him.

He smiled, and looked glad when they neared the outskirts of the little town, and could see the masts of the ships and fishing-boats rising in the harbor. Even the banking of the clouds, and the gusts of wind that beat about the coach, gave him no thought or trouble nor dulled the ardor of the day.

"Bess, are you much of a sailor?"

She smiled at him and shook her head.

"How should I remember? It is so long ago. I am not afraid," and her eyes delighted him.

"We may have a rough passage."

"I am used to storms—"

"God knows, dear, yes!" and he held her hand.

The coach drew up before an inn close to the quay, with a few sailors lounging on the benches under the windows, and a weathered sign-board bearing a rude painting of the "King Harry" creaking on its rusty hinges above the door.

Jeffray sprang out of the coach and crossed the footway with his sword under his arm. A few hairy and inquisitive faces were pressed against the windows of the tap-room. Jeffray eyed them keenly, alive to the possibilities of old Grimshaw's malice. He looked round the tap-room as he entered, scanning the sailors, who smoked their pipes and stared at him in turn. He found the innkeeper coming down the dark passage from the kitchen, a little man, bald, buckled, and white-aproned, with a red wart in the middle of his forehead.

"Good-morning, landlord. I hear a brig is to sail for France to-day."

The innkeeper bowed, rubbed his double chin, and pointed Jeffray to the door of the parlor. The sound of voices came from the room, bluff with the burliness of the sea.

"Captain George, of the *Sussex Queen*, is within, sir," he said, pushing open the

door, and giving Jeffray a glimpse into the foggy atmosphere of the room. Richard walked in.

"Thanks. Captain George, I believe?"

A big man in a blue coat and white breeches, with dirtier buckles on still dirtier shoes, rose cumbrously from a leather-backed chair, and held out a paw to the Squire of Rodenham. A second seafaring gentleman occupied the oak settle, and spat rhythmically on the floor, while the reek of tobacco battled with the abominable odor of stale beer.

"I'm Captain George, sir, to be sure."

Jeffray took stock of the red-faced and loose-jointed seaman, and summed him up as a sloven and a drunkard.

"You are sailing to-day for France, captain?"

"Well, sir, that's as it may be," and the courtier knocked out his pipe, and spat into the empty grate.

"I desire passage for two, a lady and myself."

Captain George's mate had sidled to the window, and was peering like a bird at the hurrying sky.

"Looks uncommon dirty," he remarked, thrusting out his lower lip.

"It does, mate, to be sure," and the master of the *Sussex Queen* appeared to have made one of the discoveries of his life.

Jeffray showed impatience, and glanced at the sky in turn.

"Maybe the gentleman's in a partic'lar hurry," and the worthy at the window looked profound as he saw Bess in the coach.

Captain George accepted the hint.

"To be sure; my cargo ain't full, sir. I was just about thinking of letting my boat lie another week in port."

Jeffray understood the methods of these hard-mouthed men of the sea. They were apt at a bargain, and ready to invent difficulties in order to draw more gold. He fell back upon the desired argument, and consented to be plundered in the interests of romance.

"I can pay you well, captain," he said.

"To be sure," came the inevitable response.

"You can fix your own passage-money, within reason."

"Well, captain, I reckon that's a gentleman's offer," and the seaman by the window took snuff, and sneezed as though it were a joy to him.

Jeffray pulled out his purse and sat down before the black oak table.

"Then you will sail to-day?" he said.

"Well, maybe I will."

The glitter of Jeffray's guineas decided the issue, and Captain George wiped his mouth, gathered up the money, and stuffed it into the leather purse he wore buckled to his belt.

Opening the parlor door he bawled at the men who were lounging in the tap-room, and ordered them to carry "my lord's" baggage down to the quay.

Jeffray, who had conceived no very high opinion of the captain of the *Sussex Queen*, felt that his pistols were safe, and buckled on his sword. It was not as though Captain George had to sail them to the Indies. Sloven and drunkard that he seemed, the fellow could do no great mischief in a day's sail across the Channel. Yet even Jeffray, landsman that he was, could not but mark the sinister spoiling of the weather as he stood on the inn steps and caught a glimpse of the gray sea beyond the harbor mouth. It was possible to judge by the faces of the sailors who were hauling the boxes down from the top of the coach that they were none too eager to leave the tap-room of the King Harry.

"Curse the old tub," quoth one with silver earrings and a face like leather, "a fine prize cruise for the cap'n if he can hold the old hulk together between Beachy and Dieppe."

"Dieppe, mate, Calais Roads, more like. What's the young cockerel in such a hurry for, eh?"

The man with the earrings jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the coach.

"Pair of black eyes, mate. Running across the water, most probable, with another gen'leman's Susan."

"The young fool!"

"Drat this box, it be made up o' corners."

Jeffray, who had caught nothing but the man's mutterings and their surly looks, went down the steps to help Bess from the coach. Her eyes were sparkling with the excitement of it all, and the color had come back to her cheeks. Captain George gave her a clumsy bow as she passed him on the footway, and winked at Gladden behind his master's back.

Jeffray took Bess into the parlor, where tobacco smoke still hung like a sea-fog, dimming the air. He opened one of the lattices, as the landlord brought in wine and glasses on a tray, a cold chicken, fruit, a great white loaf of bread. He looked suspiciously at the gray sky as he laid the table, the sign-board creaking and groaning on its hinges, the wind whistling and sighing in the chimneys.

"Bad weather for summer, sir."

Jeffray nodded, and poured out Bess a glass of wine.

"May I be wishing, sir, that the lady don't mind a rough sea?"

Bess glanced at Richard, and smiled, without fear.

"I would rather go," she said.

"The weather looks uncommon dirty."

"True, landlord. What sort of sea-boat is the *Sussex Queen*?"

The innkeeper pursed up his lips, and stood with his hands folded under his apron.

"Good as most, sir, I suppose," he said. "Rather rickety in her spars, I have heard. Perhaps the lady would be wishing to stay the night? We have a good room up-stairs, and could make ye very comfortable."

The insinuation was not without its charm, but Bess shook her head as Jeffray questioned her with his eyes.

"No, I am not afraid," she said.

"Thanks, landlord, I think we will slip across before the weather holds us back."

It was well past noon when Bess and Jeffray went down to the quay, and found the *Sussex Queen* moored close in with a gangway from the quay to her quarter-deck. All Bess's bridal-baggage had been hauled on board, the new trunks filled with the rich stuffs, laces, and brocades that Jeffray had bought for her at Lewes. Two boats' crews of Newhaven men were already getting out the hawsers to tow the *Sussex Queen* into the open sea. Jeffray took leave of Gladden, who had followed them from the inn, and pressed some money into the old man's hand.

"Good-bye, Gladden," he said, joyous and untroubled, "you shall hear from me in France. Mr. Wilson has my affairs in hand."

"Good-bye, sir, good-bye. May you get safe across. I don't like the look of the weather—"

"Ah, we are not afraid of it, Gladden. Look to my father's books. Mr. Bitson, of Lincoln's Inn, will see that certain moneys are paid to you quarterly. I want the old house to look well for the day when we shall return. Good-bye," and he crossed the gangway.

Gladden stood watching, Jeffray's money still in his palm, as the seamen cast off the ropes and the Newhaven men tugged at their oars. The hawsers tightened, and rose dripping above the water; the ship began to glide from the quay, and to move towards the narrow vista of foam-ribbed sea that showed beyond the harbor's mouth.

Captain George had taken Bess to the state cabin under the poop, a dark den of a place whose stern windows gave a last view of the little town and the green flats that stretched beyond. Jeffray stayed with her a moment, and then went on deck, to find the *Sussex Queen* gliding out from the harbor's mouth. Captain George was standing on the quarter-deck, trumpet in hand. The boatswain's whistle piped, and the men went swarming up the rigging to loose the sails, and give the ship her wings for France.

Bess joined Jeffray on the quarter-deck, with her old scarlet cloak about her, and the hood turned forward over her coal-black hair. They stood close together, looking

at the stretch of gray and white-maned sea. It was cheerless and threatening, a wild waste of waters tossing under a sullen sky. The sails were bellying out above, and the bluff bows of the brig began to plunge and buffet with the waves. Soon the Newhaven men dropped the tow-ropes, and pulled back to harbor with a faint cheer. The whistling breeze, the creaking and straining of the cordage, the salt spume flying with the wind, even these could not chill the hearts of the two who watched the white shores dwindling beyond the waves. They stood close to the bulwarks, Bess with her cloak wrapped round her and Jeffray's arm about her body. England was sinking into the north, and the cliffs grew gray and ghostly under the hurrying sky.

Bess turned and looked into Jeffray's eyes, wondering whether there was any sadness for him in this going forth into the unknown. He seemed to guess what was in her heart, and holding her close to him, gazed back towards England with a quiet smile.

"Bess, I am thinking that you are safe with me at last."

"Isaac cannot follow us over the sea."

"No, we are rid of the past. And you are not afraid?"

"No, I am very happy."

He buttoned the red cloak close about her throat, for the wind was keen and the scud flying.

"Take a last look at England for some years," he said.

Peter Gladden and the Rodenham servants were still drinking and gossiping at the Royal Harry, when Isaac Grimshaw came limping down the street, with the brim of his battered beaver flapping over his face, and his holly stick tapping the stones. He looked worn out and weary, yet spiteful to the last stride. Isaac saw the Rodenham coach waiting outside the inn, and his face flushed almost boyishly, as though Bess and her lover were still within reach of his pistol's snout. Slinking past the Royal Harry and meeting the full fluster of the wind, he made for the quay where a few fishermen were idling before the warehouses. Isaac hailed a tall fellow in heavy sea-boots and a filthy smock, and stood leaning on his stick, and looking back at the inn with the great coach waiting in the roadway.

"Good-day, mate; fresh breeze this. Any shipping moving?"

The man in the smock leaned against a windlass as though for a gossip, and then cocked his head towards the sea.

"*Sussex Queen*, Cap'n George, sailed an hour ago."

"Any passengers, mate?"

"Lady and gen'leman, came in the coach yonder. Took a lot o' stuff aboard."

Isaac leaned heavily on his stick for a moment, one hand fumbling at the butts of the pistols under his coat. The fellow in the smock stared at him, and then went on talking, beating one heavy boot on the stone paving of the quay.

“Damned rough weather comin’. Rather be ashore meself than out in the Channel with this sou’wester.”

Isaac nodded, yet did not follow what the fellow said.

“You look cold, father; have a nip at the Royal Harry. What—” He stopped open-mouthed, for Isaac had turned, and was limping away towards the town. The sailor watched him curiously, thinking the old man in his dotage, and that he had wasted his pity on such a crab-apple. He saw Isaac cross the roadway and disappear up an alley that led towards the low cliffs above the beach.

Old Grimshaw’s body seemed like a dry leaf quivering in the wind as he forced his way forward against the growing gale. A haze of rain was drifting over the sea, yet far beyond the gray fringe thereof the vague whiteness of a sail showed above the foam. Isaac, breathless and half fainting, leaned upon his stick, and stared out over the waste of waters. The rain came beating on him, and the wind flicked the wet brim of his hat into his face. But still he stood there like some inexorable harbinger of evil, and cursed Bess and the ship that carried her towards the shores of France.

XLVIII

The storm that swept the Channel in the summer of 17—, was long remembered by the folk along the Sussex coast. Hail fell in many places, and fierce squalls of wind, like huge beasts galloping with the lesser herd, uprooted trees, sent chimneys crashing through the roofs, and scattered tiles in many a street. At one village the church-spire fell, and all along the coast ran the rumor of ships lost and fishing-vessels caught in the storm.

Off the French coast, and still tangled in the lifting fringes of the night, the *Sussex Queen* lay rolling heavily with the waves washing her lower decks. A squall had struck her soon after sundown, beaten down her masts, and left her drifting like a wounded gull with wings trailing in the water. Two men had been killed by the falling of the masts, and another washed overboard by a heavy sea. All through the night the pumps had been clanging, and water gushing from the brig's black sides.

About two o'clock in the morning Captain George lurched down the short stairway leading to the poop-cabin. He was bleeding from a wound over the left temple and had the look of a man who was utterly unnerved. Moreover, he smelled of liquor, and his great raw hands trembled as he fumbled at the latch of the cabin door.

A ship's lantern creaked and rocked from the beacon, throwing an uncertain light about the cabin. Ever and again the poop-windows were drenched and darkened by the waves that broke over the stern of the ship. Bess was half lying on her bunk, with her red cloak wrapped round her, Jeffray leaning against the bulkhead, with the *St. Thomas à Kempis*, that had been his father's, open in his hand. Captain George looked at them as though half dazed, blood running down his face to soak into his ragged beard.

"Well, captain, what news for us?"

"News!" and the man laughed with a spasmodic croaking in the throat. "We're going to the bottom as fast as the ship can take in water."

"The ship sinking!"

Captain George's hands had been working at the buckle of his belt.

"Here, take it back, I say," and he threw the belt and purse upon the floor; "take back your damned money. But for the gold I should be safe in the King Harry, and not here to drown like a rat."

Jeffray looked at Bess and then at the unnerved sot, who was leaning against the panelling by the door. A wave struck the ship full on the poop, breaking the glass in the windows, the black water pouring in upon the floor. The lamp flared and spluttered with the wind and spray, and the narrow cabin seemed full of the gurgling

and plashing of the sea.

Jeffray sprang forward and laid his hand on the captain's shoulder.

"Come, man, are you going to drown without a fight?"

The fellow shuddered, and shook the blood out of his eyes.

"It ben't any use," he said, sullenly; "it ben't any use."

"By God, man, where's the English grit in you? Why aren't the pumps working? We can't be far from the French coast now."

Captain George shook off Jeffray's hand.

"Let be," he said, savagely, "the men have got the liquor out. They're sick of pumping, I tell ye, and they're going down drunk, bad blood to 'em!"

Jeffray stood back against the table and looked at the long-limbed sloven with a flash of scorn. The man had no courage left in him; he was sulky and sodden with his death grapple with the sea. Jeffray turned to the bunk where Bess was lying, took out his pistols from a valise, and levelled one of them calmly at the captain's head.

"Take down the lantern," he said, quietly.

The man stared at the muzzle of Jeffray's pistol, and hesitated.

"Take down the lantern, or by the love of God I'll fire on you!"

Captain George climbed the table, and, swaying from side to side, took down the lantern from its hook. Jeffray turned and spoke to Bess, steadying himself against the bunk as the ship rolled with the waves.

"God keep you, dear; it may be our last chance! I must do my best."

She looked up at him and smiled.

"I am not afraid of the dark," she answered.

Jeffray had thrown his cloak over his shoulders, and he kept his pistols covered so that the priming should not be damped in the pans.

"Where are your men, captain?"

"In the fo'c'sle."

"Lead on, and let me see what I can do with them."

They went out together, Jeffray closing the cabin door and calling back to Bess to shoot the bolts. Captain George, sulky and silent, leaned against the hand-rail, shading the lamp behind his coat. To Jeffray it seemed that the force of the wind had lessened, and that the ship groaned and tumbled less in the troughs of the sea. A wet moon shone out now and again through the ragged clouds, lighting up the dishevelled waters that raced under the hurrying sky.

Captain George and Jeffray took the lower deck where the darkness was utter save for the lamp the seaman carried. The port-holes oozed with every thundering up of the sea, the perpetual thudding of the waves reverberating through the body of the ship. Piled about the shaft of the main-mast were the trunks and boxes that the

Rodenham coach had brought from Lewes, and Jeffray looked at them with a tightening of the mouth. There was a depth of pathos in the thought that all these rich stuffs that he had bought for Bess might be torn to shreds by the remorseless sea. The pity of it strengthened all the manhood in him, and made him realize for what he fought.

Captain George had halted suddenly, and stood listening, the lantern swinging in his hand.

"D'yer hear 'em? It ben't no use, sir, I tell you, it ben't no use."

Jeffray heard laughter and rough voices rising above the racket of the storm. There was a note of fierce defiance in the sound, as though the tired and disheartened men were going to death with blasphemy upon their lips.

Captain George shivered as though cold.

"They're getting the drink in 'em," he said, peering forward into the darkness.

Jeffray pushed the coward forward.

"Our duty's clear," he said, "we must pitch the devil's juice into the sea."

A dirty lamp was burning in the fo'c'sle, the ill-trimmed wick smoking and flaring in the wind. On the floor sat three men, half naked, with a keg of rum between them, and a tin cup passing from hand to hand. In one of the bunks, a man, whose back had been broken by a falling spar, lay groaning and biting the coat that covered him, in a paroxysm of pain. Near him on an upturned bucket another fellow sat with his head between his hands, as though the dread of death were heavy on his soul.

Jeffray stood on the threshold, holding his pistols behind his back. The rough faces, the faces of men who drank to drown despair, were turned to him half threateningly under the light of the flaring lamp. The man in the bunk was groaning, and trying to pray. From without came the roar and ferment of the sea.

"Well, lads, tired of pumping, eh?"

They looked at him sullenly, as though resenting any authority at such an hour.

"What d' yer want?"

"Pass the mug, Jim; let the dandy go to the devil."

Jeffray steadied himself against the door-post, and brought his pistols from behind his back. He was cool and resolute, a man whose grimness was not to be denied.

"Drop that drink—drop it, or by Heaven, I'll send a bullet through your body."

The men gaped at him, huddling back a little across the floor, their eyes fixed on Jeffray's unflinching face and the pistol that covered them.

"Drop the drink. One—two—"

The man who held the tin mug, with neat rum swelling over the lip thereof, let the thing fall as though it burned his fingers.

“Good. Stand up, all of you. Now, listen to me.”

They obeyed him sullenly, like men in whom utter weariness of soul and body had numbed all strength and self-respect. Jeffray understood the crude pessimism that possessed them. They had lacked leadership, for the shivering sot who held the lamp had been the first to confess defeat at the hands of the sea.

“Come, lads, we’ll have no more drinking. Captain George, will you have the stuff thrown over into the sea? Steady, steady, stand back for the captain.”

The man who had been crouching on the bucket, started up, and, pushing his comrades aside, seized on the keg of rum and carried it to the door.

“I’m with you, sir,” he said; “you’ve got the right stuff in you, by damn, you have!”

From that moment Jeffray’s personality dominated the ship. He spoke to the men bluntly, bravely, and the frank manliness of his words went home into each rough heart.

“Come, lads,” he said, “we are all British to the bone. Who says die?”

He tossed his pistols aside on to a bunk, stripped off his coat and waistcoat, and rolled up his sleeves.

“I’m one of you, and I’ll work till my back breaks. I have my lass on board, and I’ll fight to the last before I see her drown.”

That touch of humanism perfected it. The men gave him a cheer, shook the hands he held out to them, and went to work like heroes at the pumps.

For an hour Bess knelt in the cabin under the poop with Jeffray’s *St. Thomas à Kempis* in her hands. She was listening, listening through the rush of wind and waters, for any sound that might betray the purpose of the night. All the past happenings of the year seemed to flash before her eyes, even as memories flash through the brain of a drowning man. She held Jeffray’s book against her bosom, careless of how the water from the broken windows soaked her dress.

Bess was growing cold and hopeless as she knelt, when she heard a voice calling to her through the weakening wailing of the wind.

“Bess! Bess!”

She sprang up and unlocked the door, to find herself in Jeffray’s arms.

“We have won! We have won!”

He was drenched to the skin, but warm and aglow with working at the pumps.

“The old ship will float.”

“Thank God!”

“Come out with me and see the dawn.”

She unclasped her cloak and wrapped it round him, though he tried to protest against the deed. Together they went out on the deck, and stood hand in hand, sheltered by the bulwarks from the wind. In the east, above the grayness of the sea,

the first golden breaking of the day fired the clouds with burning light. The storm was dying, and the *Sussex Queen* lay like a sick woman who rests in peace after the delirium of the night.

Jeffray stood with one arm about Bess's body, his head thrown back as though in triumph. He pointed southward over the sea to where, not a mile away, the shores of France were lit by the rising sun.

"The sea gave you to me, dear," he said, "and I have fought to save you from the sea."

Bess held close to him and smiled.

"I shall wear my wedding-clothes for you," she answered.

THE END

Transcriber's Notes:

Spelling and hyphenation have been left as in the original. Obvious typesetting and punctuation errors have been corrected without note.

[The end of *Bess of the Woods* by Warwick Deeping]